

Master Print:
Stanley Kauffmann on Film,
2001-2013

Edited by R. J. Cardullo

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Table of Contents:

Acknowledgements

Biography

Introduction

Reviews (Films)

Pollock, Ed Harris
The Widow of Saint-Pierre, Patrice Leconte
Moulin Rouge, Baz Luhrmann
Mulholland Drive, David Lynch
The Way We Laughed, Gianni Amelio
Gosford Park, Robert Altman
Iris, Richard Eyre
Russian Ark, Alexander Sokurov
Minority Report, Steven Spielberg
Possession, Neil LaBute
Igby Goes Down, Burr Steers
Safe Conduct, Bertrand Tavernier
Frida, Julie Taymor
Far from Heaven, Todd Haynes
Rabbit-Proof Fence, Phillip Noyce
Blackboards, Samira Makhmalbaf
The Fast Runner, Zacharias Kunuk
In the Bedroom, Todd Field
About Schmidt, Alexander Payne
Gangs of New York, Martin Scorsese
Amen, Costa-Gavras
Taking Sides, István Szabó
In This World, Michael Winterbottom
Mystic River, Clint Eastwood
Elephant, Gus Van Sant
The Dreamers, Bernardo Bertolucci
Dogville, Lars von Trier
Before Sunset, Richard Linklater
Rosenstrasse, Margarethe von Trotta
We Don't Live Here Anymore, John Curran
The Merchant of Venice, Michael Radford
Junebug, Phil Morrison
Nine Lives, Rodrigo García
North Country, Niki Caro
Paradise Now, Hany Abu-Assad
Caché (Hidden), Michael Haneke
The New World, Terrence Malick
Tsotsi, Gavin Hood
Friends with Money, Nicole Holofcener
World Trade Center, Oliver Stone

Volver, Pedro Almodóvar
The Secret Life of Words, Isabel Coixet
Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams, Jasmila Zbanic
The Wind That Shakes the Barley, Ken Loach
Private Fears in Public Places, Alain Resnais
Away from Her, Sarah Polley
Chop Shop, Ramin Bahrani
Tuya's Marriage, Wang Quan'an
Flight of the Red Balloon, Hou Hsiao-Hsien
Stuff and Dough, Cristi Puiu
Mongol, Sergei Bodrov
The Last Mistress, Catherine Breillat
Frozen River, Courtney Hunt
The Pool, Chris Smith
August Evening, Chris Eska
Vicky Cristina Barcelona, Woody Allen
Ballast, Lance Hammer
One Day You'll Understand, Amos Gitai
A Christmas Tale, Arnaud Desplechin
Silent Light, Carlos Reygadas
Everlasting Moments, Jan Troell
Hunger, Steve McQueen
Treeless Mountain, Kim So Yong
The Window, Carlos Sorin
Summer Hours, Olivier Assayas
Séraphine, Martin Provost
Quiet Chaos, Antonello Grimaldi
The Maid, Sebastián Silva
Samson & Delilah, Warwick Thornton
Ajami, Scandar Copti & Yaron Shani
Vincere, Marco Bellocchio
The Eclipse, Conor McPherson
The Father of My Children, Mia Hansen-Løve
Around a Small Mountain, Jacques Rivette
The Sicilian Girl, Marco Amenta
The Girl, Fredrik Edfeldt
Kawasaki's Rose, Jan Hrebek
Hadewijch, Bruno Dumont
When We Leave, Feo Aladag
A Somewhat Gentle Man, Hans Petter Moland
Of Gods and Men, Xavier Beauvois
Carancho, Pablo Trapero
Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives, Apichatpong Weerasethakul
Certified Copy, Abbas Kiarostami
In a Better World, Susanne Bier
A Screaming Man, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun
Mozart's Sister, Ren Féret
The Mill and the Cross, Lech Majewski
Tomboy, Cline Sciamma
Norwegian Wood, Tran Anh Hung

The Hunter, Rafi Pitts
The Kid with a Bike, Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne
We Have a Pope, Nanni Moretti
Monsieur Lazhar, Philippe Falardeau
Elena, Andrei Zvyagintsev
I Wish, Hirokazu Kore-eda
Bonsái, Cristián Jiménez
Oslo, August 31st, Joachim Trier
Gypsy, Martin Sulík
La Rafle, Rose Bosch
Dangerous Liaisons, Hur Jin-ho
Caesar Must Die, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani
The Pirogue, Moussa Touré
The Agent, Ziad Doueiri
Pietà, Kim Ki-duk

Reviewings

The Blue Angel, Josef von Sternberg
Apocalypse Now Redux, Francis Ford Coppola
The Battle of Algiers, Gillo Pontecorvo
Army of Shadows, Jean-Pierre Melville
Two or Three Things I Know about Her, Jean-Luc Godard
Mafioso, Alberto Lattuada
I Was Born, But . . ., Yasujiro Ozu

Reviews (Books)

Hollywood and Anti-Semitism, Steven Alan Carr
My First Feature, Stephen Lowenstein
The Fifth Act, Ingmar Bergman
In the Blink of an Eye, Walter Murch
Never Coming to a Theater Near You, Kenneth Turan
50 Designers/50 Costumes, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
John Huston, Jeffrey Meyers

Remembrances

Katharine Hepburn
 Marlon Brando
 Michelangelo Antonioni & Ingmar Bergman
 Paul Newman
 Claude Chabrol
 Sidney Lumet
 Tonino Guerra

Chronology

Bibliography

Index

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My deep gratitude goes out to the late Mr. Kauffmann and his wife, Laura, for their valuable support of and assistance on this project during the final years of their lives.

Biography

Stanley Jules Kauffmann was born in New York City on April 24, 1916, and was graduated from the College of Fine Arts of New York University in 1935. He spent ten years, from 1931 to 1941, as an actor and stage manager with the Washington Square Players and published a large number of short as well as long plays. He was also the author of eight novels, published in the United States and abroad, and two collections of memoirs; he worked as a book publisher's editor from 1949 to 1960. Between the years 1967 and 1986, Kauffmann taught drama and film at Yale University; he also taught at the City University of New York, Hunter College, and Adelphi University.

Starting in 1958, Kauffmann became active in criticism. At that time he was appointed the film critic of *The New Republic*, with which magazine he was associated ever since, except for an eight-month period in 1966 when he was exclusively the theater critic of *The New York Times*. In addition to his film reviews, he wrote a large number of book reviews for *The New Republic*; from 1969 to 1979 he served as both film and theater critic for this magazine; and earlier, from 1963 to 1965, Kauffmann also served as the drama critic for the Public Broadcasting television station in New York, WNET. He continued as film critic for *The New Republic* but wrote theater criticism for the *Saturday Review* for five years, from 1979 to 1985. He contributed reviews and articles to many other journals, as well—among them *Horizon*, *Commentary*, *Salmagundi*, *Yale Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Theater*, and *The American Scholar*.

Kauffmann published eight collections of film criticism in his lifetime: *A World on Film* (1966), *Figures of Light* (1971), *Living Images* (1975), *Before My Eyes* (1980), *Field of View* (1986), *Distinguishing Features* (1994), *Regarding Film* (2001), and *Ten Great Films* (2012). He was the editor of the anthology *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to "Citizen Kane"* (1972). He also published three collections of theater criticism, *Persons of the Drama* (1976), *Theater Criticisms* (1983), and *About the Theater* (2010).

In 1974 Kauffmann was given the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism; from 1972 to 1976 he was a member of the Theater-and-Film Advisory Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts; and in 1982 he received the George Polk Award for Film Criticism as well as the Edwin Booth Award in 1986, in addition to the 1986 Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement and the 1999 Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism. A former Ford Foundation, Rockefeller, and Guggenheim fellow, Kauffmann received an Emmy Award for the first-ever television series about film, which he conducted for five years in the 1960s on WNET-TV, the New York PBS station.

Stanley Kauffmann died in New York City on October 9, 2013, at the age of ninety-seven.

Introduction: “The Film’s the Thing, Stanley Kauffmann’s the Critic,” by Bert Cardullo

The Film Experience

Film editing, or the instantaneous replacement of one moving visual field with another, was once not part of our daily experience. So nothing in 400 million years of vertebrate evolution prepared us for the visual assault of cinema. But amazingly enough, the process succeeded and we became accommodated to the idea of motion pictures. Even more, a mysterious extra meaning was gained from the juxtaposition of two images that was not present in either of the shots themselves. In short, we discovered that the human mind was predisposed to cinematic grammar as if it were an entirely natural, inborn language. Perhaps it is inborn, because we spend one-third of our lives in the nightly world of dreams. There, images are fragmented and different realities collide abruptly with what seems to have great meaning. In this way we can see film editing as, probably unwittingly, employing the power and means of dream.

For many millions of years, then, human beings were apparently carrying within them the ability to respond to film and were unconsciously awaiting its arrival in order to employ their dream-faculty more fully. Some of us have long believed that, through more recent centuries, theater artists and audiences themselves had also been longing for the film to be invented even without a clue that there could be such a medium. Many tricks of stagecraft in those centuries (particularly the nineteenth) were, without knowing it, attempting to be cross-cuts and superimpositions, or double exposures. Some dramatists even imagined their work in forms and perspectives that anticipated the birth of the cinema (most notably, and excitingly, Georg Büchner in *Danton’s Death* [1835]). In his essay “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” Sergei Eisenstein shows how the novel itself—specifically, the novels of Charles Dickens—provided D. W. Griffith with a number of cinematic techniques, including equivalents to fades, dissolves, the breakdown into shots, and the concept of parallel editing. These novelistic and theatrical attempts at prognostication a few centuries earlier are puny stuff, though, because for millions of years homo sapiens had been subliminally prepared for the intricacies of film, had indeed been getting ready for them every night. Indeed, in a sense the last century, the mere centenary of film’s existence, was the emotional and psychological goal of the ages—and continues to be into the twenty-first century.

When the first moving picture flashed onto a screen, the double life of all human beings thus became intensified. That double life consists, on the one hand, of actions and words and surfaces, and, on the other, of secrets and self-knowledges or self-ignorances, self-ignorings. That double life has been part of man’s existence ever since art and religion were invented to make sure that he became aware of it. In the past 150 years or so, religion has receded further and further as revealer of that double life, and art has taken over more and more of the function; when film art came along, it made that revelation of doubleness inescapable, in fact more attractive. To wit: on the screen are facts, which at the same time are symbols; for this reason, they invoke doubleness at every moment, in every kind of picture. They stir up the concealments in our lives, both those concealments we like and those we do not like; they shake our histories, our hopes, and our heartbreaks into consciousness. Not completely, by any means. (Who could stand it?) And not more grandly or deeply than do the other arts.

But more quickly and surely, because these facts, these symbols do their stirring and shaking with visuals as well as with motion, serially and cumulatively.

Think of this process as applying to every frame of film and it is clear that when we sit before a screen, we run risks unprecedented in human history. A poem may or may not touch us; a play or novel may never get near us. But movies are inescapable. (In the case of poor films, we often have the sensation of fighting our way *out* of them.) When two screen lovers kiss, in any picture, that kiss has a minimum inescapability that is stronger than in other arts—both as an action before us and a metaphor for the “kissingness” in our own lives. Each of us is pinned privately to such a kiss in some degree of pleasure or pain or enlightenment. In romances or tragedies, in period films or modern dramas, in musical comedies or historical epics, in Westerns or farces, our beings—kissing or otherwise—are in some measure summoned up before us, in our own private visions. And I would like to suggest that the fundamental way, conscious or not, in which we determine the quality of a film is by the degree to which the re-experiencing of ourselves coincides with our pride, our shames, our hopes, our honor.

Finally, it follows, distinctions among movies arise from the way they please or displease us with ourselves: not *whether* they please or displease but *how*. This is true, I believe, in every art today; it is not a cinema monopoly. But in the cinema it has become more true more swiftly and decisively because film has a much smaller heritage of received aesthetics to reassess; because film is bound more closely to the future than other arts seem to be (the reason is that, by its very episodic or “journeying” form, film reflects for viewers the belief that the world is a place in which man can leave the past behind and create his own future); and because film confronts us so immediately, so seductively, and so shockingly (especially on the larger-than-life screen) with at least some of the truth about what we have been doing with ourselves. To the extent that film exposes the viewer to this truth about himself, in his experience of the world or of fantasy, in his options for action or for privacy, to the extent that he can thus accept a film as worthy of himself or better than himself—to that extent a film is necessary to him. And it is that necessity, I am arguing, that ultimately sets its value.

Throughout history, two factors have formed people’s taste in any art, their valuing of it, that is: knowledge of that art and knowledge of life. Obviously this is still true, but the function of taste seems to be altering. As formalist aesthetic canons have come to seem less and less tenable, standards in art and life have become more and more congruent, and as a result the function of taste is increasingly the selection and appraisal of the works that are most valuable—and most necessary—to the individual’s very existence. So our means for evaluating films naturally become more and more involved with our means for evaluating experience; aesthetic standards do not become identical with standards in life but they are certainly related—and, one hopes, somewhat braver.

Of course the whole process means that human beings feed on themselves, on their own lives variously rearranged by art, as a source of values. But despite other prevalent beliefs about the past connected with theology and religion, we are coming to see that people have always been the source of their own values. In the century in which this responsibility, this liberation, became increasingly apparent—the twentieth—the intellect of man simultaneously provided a new art form, the film, to make the most of it.

That art form is obviously still with us, and now, in the twenty-first century, more than ever, it seems. And its critics proliferate in number, in part because of what

I describe above: the “personal” element involved in the watching of any movie, and the ease nowadays with which, through the Internet, one can communicate that personal response to others. If, as Oscar Wilde once said, “The highest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography” (48)—because only by “intensifying his own personality” could the critic interpret the personality and work of others—then film criticism must be an even higher form.

The Critic as Humanist

As the highest form of autobiography, such criticism is necessarily humanistic in its approach. That approach sees films as an art like other arts, and film criticism as a human activity practiced by the educated, cultured person. Like the classical humanism of the Renaissance, such criticism asserts the dignity and worth of individuals and their capacity for self-realization, in this instance through the application of reason as well as feeling to the activity (followed by the recollection) of watching a movie. Thus the humanistic approach to cinema attempts to make sense of the individual’s emotional and intellectual, *personal* experience of a film, to draw conclusions about the value of that experience, and to communicate that value to others.

Seeing in film, then, the same potential for art that countless generations have traditionally found in painting, music, and literature—the kind of art that lifts the human spirit and stimulates the human mind—the humanist film critic looks for a similar aesthetic experience in the movies. What can movies tell us about the human condition? How do they reflect an intellectual interest in politics, religion, history, or philosophy? What kinds of ideas are hidden beneath the surface of a film? How can we interpret its symbols? How do form and content interact to convey the filmmaker’s meaning? Is there an artist behind the creation of a film? What relationship exists between this particular film or this genre of film and the world outside the movie theater? How shall we rank the quality of this motion picture compared to some ideal excellence or compared to the best cinema that has been produced in the past? These questions are familiar, for they are the same ones asked of any art form. They are not specific to film, but specific to aesthetic inquiry in general.

Because of the interest in film criticism displayed by people from a wide variety of fields, the humanistic approach presupposes that writer and reader have a certain familiarity with the general principles of aesthetic inquiry as articulated by Western culture from the time of the Greeks to the present. Film is simply assumed to be of the same order as other art forms and, therefore, subject to similar investigation. This was not always the case for the cinema, of course, because traditional definitions of art imply a high moral purpose and a complex aesthetic scheme. Art has always been defined as something qualitatively different from entertainment, in other words, and most commentators, at least in the United States, saw movies as nothing more than entertainment until after World War II.

W. R. Robinson, writing in the late 1960s, exemplifies the change of view that had taken place and that still characterizes the way in which the intellectual community looks at film. He justifies critical inquiry into movies by suggesting that they make the same appeal to the spectator as do the other arts, an assertion that also implies that the spectator is a cultured individual familiar with such appeals. Robinson states that a movie engages the viewer in a moral and aesthetic dialogue that demands some sort of response, even if only to decide whether the movie was worth attending in the first place:

In short, everyone instinctively recognizes that a movie—all art, in fact—invites him to exercise his taste in making a value judgment. He senses that a value assertion has been made and that a reply is demanded of him. And except for the most diffident, everybody also senses that he is qualified to reply. (119)

Surely everyone seeing a film will make that first value judgment, even if it is based only on immediate emotional grounds; the humanist simply goes further, probing more deeply into those initial responses, recognizing the potential for moral and intellectual interchange.

The humanist, then, is largely self-defined, and perhaps is simply a person who takes an interest in the subject at hand—here, film. A general knowledge of literature, drama, and the fine arts will help him to indulge that interest, to relate the cinematic experience to other artistic experiences. For the humanist, critical investigation into, intellectual curiosity about, and logical analysis of all aspects of experience, inside as well as outside the artwork, are habitual responses to life. Looking closely at the filmic experience, trying to discern there the mark of human excellence or potential, is no different from looking closely at the experience of reading novels, viewing paintings, or listening to music. The humanist seeks to understand human nature and mankind's place in the scheme of things, asking such traditional questions as "Who are we?" and "What is life all about?"

As Robert Richardson has pointed out, the answers to these questions may be found in movies:

Perhaps man is no longer the measure of all things, but man remains the measure of the world on film. The films of Jean Renoir, for example, show just this emphasis on the desirability of being human; it is the main theme of *Grand Illusion* and of other films. *La Strada*, revolving around three people whom psychology would call abnormal, nevertheless manages to find and then insist on humanness in the animal Zampano, in the half-wit Gelsomina, and in the Fool. The film has the pace and power of a Greek tragedy; its theme, like that of Sophocles' *Ajax*, might be said to be an examination of what it is to be human. (128-129)

The humanist, finally, looks for representations in film of general human values, the truths of human experience as they relate to the common or universal aspects of existence: birth, death, love, aggression, happiness, sorrow. He seeks an answer to the question, "What is there in this film or in my experience of it that will help me understand the variety and complexity of the human heart and mind?" Finding out more about a particular film, a genre, a director's concerns and interests, or the influences of society on the production of movies—all of these can make the moviegoing experience more meaningful, and all of them make up the province of the humanistic critic and his readers. It is only such an alchemy of the mind that can enlarge or expand the merely physical and emotional sensation of watching shadows in the dark.

The History of Film for Cultured Audiences

By the time the movies became a reality, at the end of the nineteenth century, the intellectual community had clearly demarcated the differences between highbrow and lowbrow art, between artworks seriously aimed at discerning audiences and those aimed at the unwashed masses. Movies were popular entertainment similar in form and function to dime novels, circuses, and the music hall, and thus were not worth either experiencing or commenting upon as far as intellectuals were concerned. Nevertheless, over the years, there appeared a few cultured individuals who found in the movies something of human relevance for the discerning mind.

Vachel Lindsay, an American poet, in 1915 wrote a book-length study, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, in which he attempted to distinguish the properties of film from those of other arts and to synthesize the properties of other arts within the one art of cinema. In the following year, Hugo Münsterberg, an eminent psychologist on the faculty at Harvard, explored the psychological relationship between the film viewer and the screen image in his book *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Writing near the very beginning of the history of motion pictures, Münsterberg was aware of the way in which early films recorded the activities of the world in front of the camera, thereby performing an educational or instructional, descriptive function. But he makes an excellent case for the position that the motion picture's greatest strength lies in its ability to portray human emotion. "To picture emotions must be the central aim of the photoplay" (48), writes Münsterberg. He also goes on to suggest that, as in some of the other arts, the representation of the human heart and mind on film successfully raises moral issues; for him, film narrative presents the opportunity for making moral judgments, both on the part of the moviemaker and of the audience. The truth of the representation must be tested against the truth of the viewer's own experience of the world.

Though, in one sense, these early books by a poet and a psychologist might be classed as works of film theory rather than as evaluations of specific films, they were both written by cultured individuals who were not primarily film scholars or critics. And both felt compelled to argue that, despite continued neglect by the intellectual community, the cinema deserved a place alongside the time-honored arts of literature, music, and painting. For the most part, Lindsay's and Münsterberg's rhetoric failed to convince their peers—at least in the United States. In Europe, on the other hand, intellectuals had been attracted to filmmaking from the birth of the medium. (France, for example, had initiated the extensive filming of classic plays and novels well before the First World War.) So it is not surprising that all over Europe—in Paris, Berlin, Moscow—during the 1920s, intellectuals and artists talked and wrote about the movies as the equivalent of the other arts. Between the world wars in America, however, intellectuals scarcely noted the existence of the medium. There were, of course, some thoughtful reviews of specific films in major periodicals by critics more commonly given to writing about high-class literature. Edmund Wilson, Aldous Huxley, and Robert E. Sherwood were among the few who did not condescend when they occasionally wrote about the films of the 1920s and 1930s.

Other reviewers who wrote regularly about specific films from the 1930s through the 1950s, in magazines intended for a cultured readership, and who accepted the film as worthy of intellectual scrutiny, included Harry Alan Potamkin, Otis Ferguson, Robert Warshow (whose *Immediate Experience* is reviewed in this volume), and James Agee. These writers, though clearly identifiable under the title "reviewers," also wrote what can be considered humanistic criticism, since their

perceptions about film included thoughtful references to contemporary ideas in psychology, sociology, politics, and aesthetics that would be understood by a cultured audience. They did not simply recount the plot of a film and say whether they liked it or not, but went further in trying to relate their experiences of individual movies to the intellectual concerns of the day. (Robert Warshow, for example, in his 1954 essay titled “The Westerner,” about the hero of western movies, as well as in his 1948 piece “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” discusses not simply a number of films, but also the American fascination with violence.)

Nevertheless, the intellectual community as a whole did not make film one of its concerns until after the Second World War. In part because of the pressure of returning veterans, some of whom had seen non-Hollywood films while stationed abroad, and in part because of an increase in experimental or avant-garde filmmaking by members of the art community who were working in academic departments, film societies sprang up on college campuses all over the U.S. In addition to providing inexpensive entertainment to students making do on the G.I. Bill, the film societies introduced Americans to foreign films like those from Italy, which attempted to treat postwar problems realistically, to present life as it was lived and not as it was dramatized or glamorized in the well-known, predictable genres of most Hollywood films. The experience of watching such movies invited more organization on the part of film societies, and soon more or less random exposure to the classics of world cinema, whether they were silents or sound pictures, became codified into college courses.

The result was that by the late 1950s and early 1960s, a large number of college-educated Americans had come to realize that movies existed which were not simply escapist entertainment, but which held possibilities for human enrichment similar to the possibilities offered by the more traditional arts of drama, painting, and literature. In the 1966 essay “The Film Generation,” from *A World on Film* (his first collection of film criticism), Stanley Kauffmann himself presented five reasons for its rise, which included those born since 1935, or after a generation that saw movies only in terms of escapist entertainment. Kauffmann contended that:

- (1) In a technological age, “film art flowers out of technology.”
- (2) The inherent documentary technique of pictorially recording items—what Kauffmann refers to as the “world of surfaces and physical details”—can give “great vitality to a film” in the hands of a gifted artist.
- (3) Film can “externalize psychical matters,” such as “inner states of tension, or of doubt or apathy,” better than the novel or the theater.
- (4) “Film is the only art besides music that is available to the whole world at once, exactly as it was made.”
- (5) “Film has one great benefit by accident: its youth, which means not only vigor but the reach of possibility” (417-418).

Kauffmann’s directly stated and cleanly structured essay was written in his characteristically precise, quietly professional style. Looking optimistically toward the future, “The Film Generation” supplied historical context and reasonable definition for the burgeoning American film culture.

The early films of Ingmar Bergman (e.g., *The Seventh Seal*, 1957) and Federico Fellini (e.g., *La Strada*, 1954) were the first to be reviewed and praised by representatives of this burgeoning American film culture: highbrow critics in prestigious journals. The first films of the French New Wave—François Truffaut’s *The Four Hundred Blows*, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*, and Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*—won prizes at Cannes in 1959. Anyone who claimed to be an intellectual, a cultured individual who was aware of the artistic trends in contemporary life, had to see these pictures. A circuit of art-house movie theaters eventually appeared that featured such films, which were distributed all over the country. People came not to forget their cares, as they did at Hollywood movies, but to think about the difficulties and problems of living in the nuclear age.

And a lively and informed criticism of these movies began to appear in print, not only in intellectual magazines like *The Nation* and *The New Republic*—where Stanley Kauffmann was the film critic from 1958 to 2013—but also in hundreds of highly literate books by writers from a wide variety of disciplines, as the intellectual community sought to map out this new area of study. In the early 1970s, moreover, several universities began to sponsor new journals devoted to a wide-ranging, widely practiced exploration of the cinema, such as *Film Heritage* and *Literature/Film Quarterly*. During the late 1970s and well into the 1980s, however, as film studies in the academic world became more specialized and thereby “legitimized,” evolving on many campuses into doctorate-granting departments, fewer and fewer writers from other disciplines felt comfortable about making the crossover into movie criticism. Nonetheless, the humanistic approach is still alive and well anywhere and any time so-called generalists, however few in number, decide to analyze movies. And that approach is exemplified in *Master Print: Stanley Kauffmann on Film, 2001-2013*.

The World in a Frame

In *Master Print*, as in his previous collections, Stanley Kauffmann regularly comments on the nature, as well as what can be called (with the advent of the Internet) the crisis, of film criticism, as he does on such subjects as the function of criticism, the qualifications of a critic, the influence or power of critics, newspaper reviewing versus magazine criticism versus academic scholarship, and critical theory as opposed to critical practice. Other topics routinely touched on in Kauffmann’s work include the relationship between theater and film, particularly the difference between stage and screen acting; children and the cinema and the phenomenon of child actors; the relationship between novels and the movies made from them; Shakespeare and the cinema; sex and sexuality as well as realism, taste, and violence in film; the pleasures, and treasures, of documentary film; various national cinemas (among them those of Brazil, Senegal, and Finland); the extent to which cinema seems embedded in French culture more than in any other; the phenomenon of film festivals; the persistence of American independent filmmakers in the face of the commercial behemoth of Hollywood; the ostensible “death of film” in the age of digital cinema; and the issue of government subsidy for the cinema in particular and for the arts in general.

The present collection, *Master Print: Stanley Kauffmann on Film, 2001-2013*, contains a representative sample of Kauffmann’s movie criticism. Included in *Master Print* are reviews of such notable fiction features as David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, Samira Makhmalbaf’s *Blackboards*, Alexander Payne’s *About Schmidt*, Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*, Michael Haneke’s *Caché (Hidden)*, Isabel Coixet’s *The Secret Life*

of *Words*, Nanni Moretti's *We Have a Pope*, and Kim Ki-duk's *Pietà*; reconsiderations of such classic films as Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*, and Yasujiro Ozu's *I Was Born, But . . .*; remembrances of late, distinguished film artists such as Katharine Hepburn, Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, and Ingmar Bergman; and reviews of books on such subjects as Hollywood and anti-Semitism, film editing, costume design, and John Huston.

My deep thanks, finally, to Stanley Kauffmann for having been the critic many of us aspire to be, as well as for championing criticism in an art form, film, more hostile to it than any others. Kauffmann's film criticism—his application to the cinema of the highest standards—arose, not so paradoxically, out of his love for the movies, which was sublime. In the 1974 essay "Why I'm Not Bored," included in his collection *Before My Eyes*, he intimated his love for the movies by writing that though a film itself may be boring, the idea of going to it isn't. Boredom is incompatible with hope, he averred, and hope is more of a constant in film than in any other art, even the theater. "No matter how much I know about a film's makers or its subject before I go, I never really know what it's going to do to me," he declared. "Depress me with its vileness, or just roll past, or change my life in some degree, or some combination of all three, or affect me in some new way that I cannot imagine" (436-437).

I am particularly impressed by the extent to which Kauffmann's criticism always reveals a love of good art in any form, be it theatrical, literary, or cinematic. Speaking to this love, I would like to close with the following words, written by Lionel Trilling about a great artist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, but equally applicable to Stanley Kauffmann, the great *critic* as artist: "We feel of him, as we cannot feel of all moralists, that he did not attach himself to the good because this attachment would sanction his fierceness toward the bad—his first impulse was to love the good" (245).

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Reviews

Pollock

26 February 2001

A French film about Beethoven that arrived in the United States in 1937 contained one unforgettable scene. The composer is seated at a table covered with sheets of music manuscript. Behind his chair stands a lady friend. Beethoven becomes upset about something and starts to rise. The lady puts her hands on his shoulders and restrains him. "Sit down, Ludwig," she says soothingly. "Finish your symphony."

Not every film about an artist contains a comparable line, but the majority of such films tend in that direction—the reduction of an artist's life to the palpable. This reduction doesn't always mean resemblance to our own lives: more often, it means resemblance to previous films about artists. Such pictures have been made since the form was invented. Why? A film about an artist's life can reveal externals but very little about the making of his art. We can see him grab a brush or a pen or sit down at a piano and wham away, but what does that tell us about what he did? Flaubert, after consulting theater people, said, "The theater is not an art. It is a secret." (He never cracked that secret.) Anyone who had consulted Flaubert about the novel might have come away with a similar comment.

So, if every film about an artist's life has to be more concerned with the life than the art, why does that life attract us? Rembrandt or Van Gogh or Schumann or Browning? For two reasons, I'd say. First, a kind of resentment: we want to learn of elements in his life that are cognate with ours—schools, marriage, livelihood, and so on—the higher and the lower gossip that will make him one of us, keep him at our level, this person who has dared to captivate us. Second, sheer envy, not of talent as much as of wholeness: of an element that is much less cognate with most of our lives, heroism. To become first-class artists, these people needed moral courage beyond our own needs or possibilities. A distinguished writer once said to me, "There's no secret about being a great writer. It's simple. You just have to give your life." He didn't, and didn't become one for all his distinction; but he knew what was lacking.

Also important, and certainly not to be discounted in relation to films, there is the old mythology about artists—bohemianism, in all its velvet trappings. Yes, many a great artist led a sober regularized life—Bach, Verdi, Shaw, Hawthorne—probably the majority of the great ones; but there is always the sly hope in the public for Byron or Van Gogh or Toulouse-Lautrec. (Another film about the last-named is in the works, I hear.) And note how many latter-day biographers of artists feel they must supply previously omitted sexual details regardless of relevance. But even the most orthodox lives of artists are different at the core from other people's lives. Whenever the author I mentioned above was at a party and was asked what he did, he never said, "I write novels." He said, "Insurance." He knew that otherwise everyone in the room would look at him with a quite different geniality, would have different expectations, would make different sorts of jokes. In sum, then—in films, most certainly—the artist is only seemingly an ordinary member of our society. He (or, of course, she) follows other lights, obeys other signals, responds to other hungers than most of us do. There seems to me not a shred of romance in that statement. The trouble for films is that the artist's differences are only superficially dramatizable, and the real point of it all—the art itself—can only be glossed.

Pollock, Ed Harris's film about the painter, is the absolute acme of all the attractions and all the difficulties inherent in this sort of work. Jackson Pollock had a life that seemed written by a skilled scenarist: years of obscurity and struggle, ten years or so of dazzling triumph, then a falling-off and a dramatic death (a car crash while drunk, which also killed one of the two young women who were with him). Further, the crowning touch for a film: the best of his art, which made him famous and wealthy, exemplifies moral heroism. He was rewarded for his persistence.

We meet Pollock in New York in the early 1940s at about the time he meets the painter Lee Krasner, who becomes not only his wife but his partner, supporter, and almost rote sparring partner. In these earlier years he is painting in a manner that is not totally different from a number of other contemporary painters. Then he and Krasner move to Long Island. One day, while he is preparing paints for a canvas, he accidentally drips a little on the floor. He stares at it. This is the worst moment in the film—the “Finish your symphony” moment. I almost saw a comic-strip light bulb go off over Pollock's head. It was the epitome of what film cannot do about an artist.

The huge drip paintings that are now virtually synonymous with his name are still subjects of critical controversy. (Clement Greenberg, a staunch advocate, said: “‘Drip’ is inaccurate; more correct would be ‘pour and spatter.’”) Pollock's opponents are easy to imagine: the admirers believe that Pollock altered the idea of easel painting, draftsmanship, the venerable line-versus-color discussion. He himself said: “I don't work from drawings or color sketches. My painting is direct. . . . I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them.”

The man's temperament and character were so fitting for the conventional unconventional Mad Artist that it is hard to believe that Pollock himself had no sense of performance. He did what he felt like doing—the tantrums, the binges, the offenses, the isolations—without any apparent trace of fakery or exhibitionism: still, he knew what he was doing and with his internal eye must have seen himself doing it. The most admirable aspect of his behavior—the only admirable aspect—is that he behaved this way before he was famous: it wasn't swollen ego that caused it, but a fierce solipsistic impatience with the mortal conditions that most of us accept.

That quality, plus the possibility that Pollock was objectively aware of his subjective behavior, is presumably what drew Harris to the idea of the film. It's hard to think that only a passion for Pollock's work would have attracted him, or the tempestuous life of an unimportant painter. Combine the reputation and the life, and an actor appears—an actor-director.

The taciturn menace, the conviction of intelligence and perception that Harris has shown previously serve him excellently here. To put it another way, his sincerity is never in doubt. His directing is up to what is needed. There are no scintillating touches; there are no slips.

The biggest difficulty for his directing is not the action but the talking, and not Pollock's. The screenplay by Barbara Turner and Susan J. Emshwiller includes a number of the people who figured in Pollock's life. So the film is laden with quick introductions of real persons who have to make some sort of impression. The most difficult instance is Clement Greenberg, who, while having a drink, has to pass judgments for the ages.

Lee Krasner, of course, is the most important other character, a difficult role, a punching bag who has yet to be very much of an individual in her own right, the person who is berated and abused and yet has to be something more than patient. Marcia Gay Harden plays Krasner, and her performance is sure to be underrated. She

makes a being out of a woman whose husband treated her as part companion and part utensil.

Yet, creditable though *Pollock* is, it raises the old question again: why make a film about an artist? The only picture I can remember that brought me closer to an artist is François Girard's *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*, most of which was oblique and tangential. *Pollock*, for all its dedication, is just—yes, just—one more film about that perennially obdurate subject, an artist.

The Widow of Saint-Pierre

12 March 2001

Opening shots of films often make promises, and almost equally often those promises are broken. A fine first shot is thus almost as much a caution as an enticement. One of the many rewards in *The Widow of Saint-Pierre* is that the promise of its beautiful opening is beautifully kept.

We see a long and lofty room with several large windows, a room almost bare of furniture. At the farthest window a young woman in mid-nineteenth-century dress is looking out. It's a moment in Corot. On the soundtrack she tells us—in French (subtitled, of course)—that the story we are about to see is based on real events. But nothing in the film is more real than the fulfillment of this opening, the pathos for the eye that leads to what will come.

The year is 1849, the principal setting is Saint-Pierre, a small island off the coast of Newfoundland. At the time it was a French colony. (Now it is a department of France.) At first there is fog, thick and accustomed, while low strings in the film score intensify it. Out of this fog emerge fisherfolk, stolid, sturdy, past complaint about their circumstances. The fishermen go to a tavern. Two of them get drunk and begin a trivial quarrel about a third man. They row over to a smaller island where that man lives and in a pointless altercation murder him.

The local court sentences one of the men to prison, but he is accidentally killed while being transported. The other man, Neel Auguste, has been sentenced to death—in the usual French way, the guillotine. There is one difficulty: Saint-Pierre has no guillotine. (The old French slang for “guillotine” is “widow”; hence the title of the film.) Letters are dispatched, but it will be eight months until a widow arrives. Thus in this small community a condemned man must be detained while the means of executing him is procured.

The commander of the island garrison, a captain, is responsible for the imprisonment and the care of Auguste. Since the prisoner has nothing to do but lie in his cell, the captain's wife, known as Madame La, asks her husband for Auguste's help in starting a garden and building a hothouse. The captain agrees. Auguste helps her and does other chores for Madame La. The weeks gradually disclose the man he is, the full sentient being under the drunk who committed the murder.

Any suspicion we may have that this story is going to turn into a triangle is very soon shown to be merely our vulgarity. Auguste does, in the course of time, have an affair with a woman he once knew; he impregnates her and is, by the captain's order, allowed to marry her. But among the captain and Madame La and Auguste a transaction occurs that can only be called a spiritual fusion. The captain and his wife become almost painfully aware of the humanity within the man they are holding for his death. At one point Madame La even arranges for Auguste to take a small boat laden with food and to row—he is strong—across the bay to Canada and escape.

Auguste starts. But after a while he reappears in Saint-Pierre and returns to his cell because he doesn't want to get his benefactors in trouble.

But the trouble comes. (With an ironic sting. The ship bearing the guillotine arrives in Saint-Pierre harbor with its rudder broken, and it has to be towed in. Auguste volunteers for the rowing crew because he can earn some money for his pregnant wife.) The guillotine is erected; an executioner is found—not without difficulty, because an executioner automatically becomes a pariah. At the last, the captain, chiefly out of love for his wife and a wish to stand with her in her compassion, opposes the execution. But the execution occurs. The captain is sent back to France on charges of sedition and meets a military fate. (This fate returns us to the opening shot.)

All the while this film is running before us, a fragrance of great literature seems to fill the air. In its paradox, its character unfoldings, its poignancy, its brutalization of reason by the roles of society, there are hints of Hugo and Hardy and Dostoevsky and Chekhov, all wizards of those themes. This phenomenon is far from a literary bondage in the film: it is the approach of this film to something like the evocations of great writing—transformations brought about by new definings of love, not by will. The screenplay by Claude Faraldo supports this view: it uses the means of cinema, sheer cinema, to open apertures of spirit.

This, of course, means that Faraldo provided opportunities for the director, the cinematographer, and the cast to achieve these things. The director was Patrice Leconte, whose previous films, such as *Monsieur Hire* and *The Hairdresser's Husband* and *Ridicule*, were made with the sort of neat competence that is like a door slammed on growth. Here Leconte bursts through—to an ache of size, deploying space in the evocation of spirit. Scene after scene is unrolled before us in a manner that suggests a vow to truth, a kind of beneficial tension, a quiet fervor that lifts the whole experience far past the adventures in the narrative.

The cinematographer was Eduardo Serra, who has worked with Leconte before and who also did *The Wings of the Dove*. Here the seasons were at his disposal (a lone horseman riding across a snowy field) and textures were manifold (stone cottages, *luxe* gubernatorial interiors), and Serra made the most of them in two ways. It is as if he and Leconte had agreed that the visual beauty of the film would serve as contrast to the cruelty of the people within it, and it would also symbolize the purity, the high air, the oceanic swell of exaltation that enfold the captain and Madame La, and that in an odd way also reconcile Auguste. The fog of the opening has dissolved.

As for the cast, all the minor roles are richly cast, especially Michel Duchaussoy as the governor and Philippe Magnan as the judge. The three principals are even better. Auguste is played by Emir Kusturica, the well-known Yugoslav director (*Time of the Gypsies*) who here makes his acting debut. He endows the role with a blend of silent animal strength and grim resignation. Madame La is Juliette Binoche, whose recent mistakes include the saccharine *Chocolat* and an ill-advised Broadway appearance in Pinter's *Betrayal*, but in this role, she gives us a woman raised beyond her knowledge of herself by a moral responsibility she didn't know she could accept. The captain is Daniel Auteuil, and that sentence, with the role's name changed, is becoming a complete statement. With Auteuil, we know we are going to see reality plumbed, the sort of verity that makes most realistic film acting look facile.

One minor point. When he is in uniform, which is most of the time, Auteuil never wears his cap, which the captain must have known is a breach of regulations. An actor's quirk, I suppose. Well, if it's such an excellent actor . . .

Moulin Rouge

11 June 2001

In 1996 a brash young Australian director named Baz Luhrmann, with one film and some hit songs to his credit, made a modernized version of *Romeo and Juliet*. The first thing we saw was a television set with a newscaster speaking the opening chorus. The setting was “Verona Beach” in the 1990s; the balcony scene took place in a swimming pool; the characters were racially diversified, drove large convertibles, and carried pistols. I can’t say that I enjoyed the film, but I admired its—odd word though it is—sincerity. More than most “concept” theater productions of Shakespeare that I have seen, this film showed conviction rather than blatant bravado, an attempt to convey the idea that Shakespearean truth persists through the ages. Its very wildness evoked some of the passion of the original.

Now Luhrmann has made *Moulin Rouge*, which has a very different agenda. Those who remember John Huston’s 1952 film of that name may expect another biography of Toulouse-Lautrec, with giant sufferings in a pygmy body. Toulouse is in the new film, but only as one of the attendant gargoyles. The focus, we think at the start, is on a young English writer in Paris at the start of the last century and his rocky love affair with the star of the Moulin Rouge, the famous cabaret, which he can see from his window.

If that focus were maintained, this film might have some *vie Parisienne* glamour and some *La Bohème* pathos. But the focus soon shifts to Luhrmann. He seems much less interested in his story than he is in Luhrmann virtuosity. Intense close-ups of lovers’ faces, kissing or just breathing in each other’s breath; intense close-ups of almost everyone; grotesque makeup on all the actors except the lovers and the cabaret dancers; a cascade of kaleidoscopic cuts and juxtapositions—these are what the director really wants us to admire, it seems.

But that second focus, too, dissolves into another. The virtuosity is being used to an almost savage end. For the first fifteen minutes or so, we are stunned by the incessant flow of splendiferous settings and images, spectacular cabaret shows. The production design by Catherine Martin, who costumed *Romeo and Juliet* and who also collaborated on the costumes here with Angus Strathie, is lush. The cinematography of Donald M. McAlpine, who did *My Brilliant Career*, *Breaker Morant*, and of course *Romeo and Juliet*, not only exploits the bizarre luxury of the boudoirs and the cabaret shows, it gives the whole art nouveau ambience a garish decadence.

But there is more. Luhrmann is out to subvert the very ambience that he and his collaborators have created. The first hint is in the score. We soon begin to hear anachronistic music—from *The Sound of Music* to a Madonna number. Sometimes we hear familiar pop lyrics spoken as dialogue. (The screenplay, by the way, is by Luhrmann and Craig Pearce, and it certainly is by the way.) This musical incongruity leads to easy laughs, as the audience recognizes the latter-day music in this *fin-de-siècle* story, but, more importantly, it helps Luhrmann’s ultimate basic purpose. He wants to make us aware of the means by which he is manipulating us. With this mix of period and mod music, with the Punchinello quality of most of his people, he wants to flay the period open. Not, it seems, because he particularly hates the *Belle Époque*, but because he hates the process of romantic manipulation. With the musical ridicule and with much else that follows, he mocks the manufacture of sentimental reverence.

The framework of the screenplay is the book that the writer-hero, Christian, is whacking out on a typewriter in a Parisian garret a year after his love affair began. We move from huge close-ups of his typing to the cabaret across the way and to Christian's encounter, a year earlier, with Satine, the star. He is quickly in love, she is in whatever she prefers to be in at the moment. ("I choose my emotions," she says at one point.) A fabulously rich duke is also smitten with her, and so far as any drama is ignited, which is not very far, it is in the suitors' rivalry for Satine, poor but fervent love versus gilded whim. But the only real interest stirred by the plot is in recognition—picking out the occasional lifts from Dumas's play *La Dame aux Camélias* and Piave's libretto for *La Traviata*. Christian actually does throw money in Satine's face after she has left him for the duke; she actually is dying of consumption. These "lifts" are there for the same reason as the anachronistic music: mockery. "Oh, you're moved by Dumas and Verdi, are you?" Luhrmann seems to say. "Well, take a look at the mechanics."

The net result of all this cinematic whirling, of the "wrong" music and of the parodic plot, is that nothing at all in the film moves us. (How could we be moved by a film that has hot scenes played on top of an immense dummy elephant?) Characters are only programmed composites; anguishes are flooded across the screen as part of the decor. And this, too, is part of Luhrmann's craftiness. He wants us to be unmoved. He wants us to see the emotional climaxes as trickeries, disclosed here by a caustic postmodernist. With near-Brechtian brutality, swathed though it is in silks and frills, he is scoffing at the fabrications of romance.

This procedure makes rough demands on his actors. They are compelled to plunge into torrents of feeling though they have no real beings. Satine's line about choosing emotions seems to apply to the whole cast and is part of the "exposure." Satine is played by Nicole Kidman, insofar as she is recognizable. She is aggressively made up, with a mouth that is meant to suggest more than a mouth; she is furiously costumed; and she is thrust at us, on beds and trapezes, as the summa of sex. Because she has no reality, it is a tough job; and in any case Kidman is no Dietrich.

Christian is played by the Scottish actor Ewan McGregor, who does everything he is asked to do as heatedly as possible; but he, too, has to contend with the deliberately pseudo-emotional script and style. Besides, Luhrmann and McAlpine apparently noticed that McGregor has a slight resemblance to Laurence Olivier, so we get a number of Heathcliff shots, even to the lock of hair on the forehead—another subtle mockery of romance.

Jim Broadbent, the affable Englishman who was W. S. Gilbert in *Topsy-Turvy*, plays the manager and compere of the cabaret, as egregiously made-up as most of the actors. Broadbent is miscast; guile and show-biz warmth do not come easily to him. (Remember an antecedent in this sort of role, Peter Ustinov in *Lola Montès*.) The gifted John Leguizamo, who was Luhrmann's Tybalt in 1996, is here Toulouse, hobbling and grimacing away, but with no person. Richard Roxburgh, as the duke, is insufficiently ducal, even in this charade.

We are left, then, with a work that is spheres away from Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, which was ultimately an attempt to be true. This film intricately disguises the fact that it is a disguise. Underneath its swirls and swoonings, we see at the last a hatred of what it is lavishly doing.

Mulholland Drive

29 October 2001

David Lynch once said: "I don't think that people accept the fact that life doesn't make sense. I think it makes people terribly uncomfortable." This is a truth past question, I'd say, but how is an artist to make use of this truth? Lynch, whose directing and writing career glows with talent, has developed a mode that serves his perception. He devises films that seem sensible, sufficiently so as to engage us, and then he proceeds to subvert sense. Other artists structure their work in an order that itself pleases us and then use their order as an avenue to fundamental disorder. (There is no larger example than *King Lear*.) Lynch goes directly to the disorder without the seductions of order. Imagine Abstract Expressionist painting done with realistic figures, and somewhere in this oxymoron dwells David Lynch.

Take, for instance, the very opening of his new film, *Mulholland Drive*. A large car is moving along that drive, high above Hollywood. A man in the front seat points a pistol at a dark-haired woman in the back seat. He is presumably about to shoot her, when another car crashes into the first one and everyone is killed except the young woman. Who this woman is we never learn, although we subsequently see a great deal of her. Why the man wanted to kill her we never learn, or how she got the wad of cash in her bag. Our expectation that we will learn these things is exactly what Lynch is out to subvert. All he basically wants to do in this opening sequence is to evoke cinematic responses in us, familiar from *film noir*, as one might strike familiar chords on the piano that remind us of music we know but that are now plucked out of origin or progression. Sense is not the point: the responses are the point.

Then we see a blonde young woman named Betty arriving in Hollywood by air. She confides in an elderly couple whom she has met en route that she is going to try for an acting career, and they wish her luck. As the elderly couple leave in their limo, they exchange glances of wry compassion. (Much later, I might as well admit now, this couple, reduced to mouse-size, squeeze under Betty's door.) The would-be actress proceeds to an apartment that belongs to an aunt who once was in films. When Betty goes into the bathroom, she discovers the dark-haired young woman—a complete stranger to her—taking a shower. Betty phones her aunt, who does not know anything about the other young woman; but that woman is so dazed and helpless that warm-hearted Betty allows her to stay. When she asks the other woman her name, the reply, garnered from a glance at a poster of *Gilda* on the wall, is Rita.

The synopsis above distorts, because it suggests lively pace and progress in Lynch's style, which, to the contrary, is slow and pictorially inquisitive. He wants to explore sensually and imaginatively every frame he puts before us; he has a fine ally in the cinematographer, Peter Deming, and his real purpose is to provide Deming with related opportunities to realize Lynch's vision. In this respect, Lynch reminds me of Robert Wilson, the theater artist who uses the stage not as a dramatist, but as a painter uses a canvas, and who can fascinate us without an iota of traditional drama and sometimes no shred of theme—other than linked visual organisms.

A story of sorts follows in *Mulholland Drive*, including Betty's audition for a film role, a lesbian affair between the two women, eccentric visits to eccentric places. The film-industry sequences would be re-runs of all the Hollywood satires we know, except that Lynch is never primarily interested in the satire; he merely wants those scenes, too, to float past us like toy boats on a stream. One of the eccentric visits is to a former film theater, now a club, where a woman sings a passionate American song

in Spanish and faints before finishing, while the song continues. Much later, the film returns to this place to end there. The name of the club is Silencio.

Lynch has provided plenty of material for his oneiric, leisurely picture-making, enough to make a film of 146 minutes, but no more of that material need be specified. In *Mulholland Drive*, as in such past films of his as *Wild at Heart* and *Blue Velvet*, Lynch challenges our expectations of narrative and credibility by luxuriating in something else—the unexplained, the making of no-sense that (he says) underlies life. Much of the comment on this new film traduces him by praising his ideas, as if the purpose of *Mulholland Drive* were to castigate Hollywood and to explore the characters of Rita and Betty along with others in the cast. Thus, in my view, they convert Lynch into a failure, because the Movieland stuff is stale and the characterizations are superficial. One of his purposes, I'd venture, is to leave such critical comment high and dry.

Besides Robert Wilson, another comparison. Rainer Werner Fassbinder spent much of his brief, prolific career in making films that attacked conservative structure. Some of them were jaggedly irresistible, but for me his chief achievements were his films *Effi Briest* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. This is not because these pictures were shot and edited in the traditional manner, not because they make obeisance at the altar of Loveliness, but because, like the Fontane and Döblin novels on which they are based, their traditional structures disclose most clearly the theme of much Fassbinder work: hatred of tradition, of bourgeois hypocrisies and cruelties. Lynch, too, has done work that is conventional in form and in loveliness. *The Elephant Man* dealt tenderly with a human being condemned to inhuman life, and became an assault on received ideas. Even more subtly and beautifully, Lynch's last film, *The Straight Story*, reached pure spirituality through an utterly vernacular lexicon. In most Lynch films, including *Mulholland Drive*, his very method is a rebuttal of the audience's expectation of sense. But for me, *The Straight Story* rebuts this expectation more powerfully because it reveals the insufficiency of traditions through traditional means.

The Way We Laughed

3 December 2001

With three films, Gianni Amelio put himself in the front rank of contemporary directors. Born in 1945 in southern Italy (his work shows a special empathy for southern Italians and Sicilians), he joined RAI, the national television network, in 1970. Soon he won praise for his documentaries and moved into feature films. His third feature, *Open Doors* (1990), adapted from a Leonardo Sciascia novel about a judge and justice, announced the arrival of a socially responsive artist who combined full-bodied compassion with refinement of touch. Two years later, *Stolen Children*, about a young Milanese policeman who escorts two children of a delinquent mother back to Sicily, gave full play to Amelio's taciturn but glowing empathy. And two years later came *Lamerica*, about an Italian swindler in Albania and a supposed voyage to the United States, a work that is a candidate for permanence in the world's film treasury.

These three films, especially the latter two, established Amelio as a valuable scarcity: a humanist director more concerned with comprehension than with expose, intent on making complex art without egotistical display. He was a reminder of the Bertrand Tavernier who made *The Clockmaker* and *The Judge and the Assassin*, a

director who seemed thankful, rather than boastful, that he had a talent to put at the service of his perceptions.

Now arrives Amelio's *The Way We Laughed*—with its American premiere at the Film Forum in New York—which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival last year. The title comes from a page in an Italian weekly that printed old jokes sent in by readers, reminders of what had been thought funny in previous years. For Amelio, the title is ironic: the period is 1958-1964, but what is remembered is not funny.

The first minute is an assurance that Amelio is still Amelio. We are in the railroad station in Turin, with passengers disembarking. In the foreground a youth, apparently waiting for someone, anxiously slides out of sight behind a pillar. The sky is gray, the light is misty. We learn from the dialogue that most of these new arrivals are Sicilian. Simply, swiftly, Amelio has told us two things: these southerners, from an island that they consider the very residence of the sun, have arrived in a different climate; and someone who is waiting for someone is wary of the encounter. Both our visual and our narrative appetites are quickened.

The quality of what we see never wavers. Throughout, the superb cinematographer Luca Bigazzi (who did *Lamerica*) creates the damp and chilly north almost without remission, yet without blatancy, as if the Sicilians are getting used to it because the work they need is here. Part of the conflict in the film is thus presented without comment: all the Sicilians in the story recognize and treat one another as compatriots in an Italy that is not theirs.

That youth back in the station is Pietro, a Sicilian who has been a student in Turin and who is waiting for Giovanni, his older brother. Pietro is shy about meeting Giovanni for temperamental reasons that become clear. Giovanni is stronger, rougher—and illiterate—but absolutely devoted to Pietro. Amelio's screenplay presents their not-quite-parallel lives through the next six years, with job and personal vicissitudes, set in a cinematic texture that is much more than surface realism.

A few of the story touches seem included dutifully, such as an encounter with a Communist parade in a film that is otherwise apolitical: but most of them are germane, like the brothers' visit to a brothel and its unforeseen homely consequences. By and large, the brothers are truly a pair, though they live quite differently. Giovanni is struggling steadily with the world of bread; Pietro, almost resentfully loving and grateful, struggles fitfully for education.

Then comes a sadness—for us, not the brothers. About halfway through this two-hour film, Amelio's screenplay slides from organism into arrangement. Things happen that have no basis in what we have seen, such as Giovanni's rise to relative comfort (and his first appearance in a white shirt). Pietro disappears for a year—how he lives is not mentioned—and turns up well-crammed to pass a teachers' exam. A murder occurs, unexplained to us, and the responsibility for it is juggled. Through the second half of the film, we are uncomfortably aware that Amelio is trying to evolve a tale, *à la* Pratolini or Vittorini, about time's transmutations through the battle to endure, but he has not hidden the seams, and sometimes he plays overtly for tears. (There is an especially regrettable Movieland use of the French song "La Mer.") The narrative contrivances are all the more unsettling because the filmic elements never decline—the cinematography, the editing, the acting, the directing. It is as if a fine orchestra that had been playing music of a high order suddenly segues into a lesser score, the same good playing with a drop in the material.

Still, the wonderful level of the film's being as film induces us to take its lapse as no more than a lapse. The making of this picture is so sure that hope for Amelio,

for his future, is almost forced on us. To my knowledge, this is the first screenplay that he has written alone, and it seems clear that he needs collaborators such as those he has had in the past, to help his exceptional talent to flourish further.

Additional encouragements for us: Amelio has discovered a sixteen-year-old named Francesco Guiffida, a newcomer from whom he has drawn a sensitive Pietro. And Amelio continues his collaboration with Enrico Lo Verso, who had the leading roles in *Stolen Children* and *Lamerica* and here plays Giovanni. Guiffida's debut and Lo Verso's growth are further proof of Amelio's talent, further reason to believe in him.

Gosford Park

31 December 2001

Here is an English manor house with a rather unusual staff. Alan Bates is the butler, Helen Mirren the housekeeper, and Eileen Atkins the head cook. Richard E. Grant is the first footman, Derek Jacobi the master's valet, Emily Watson the head housemaid. Of course there are numerous other servants. A weekend shooting party is in progress—it is 1932—and above-stairs, too, are unusual folk: Michael Gambon, the manorial master, Kristin Scott Thomas, his wife, and such guests as Maggie Smith, a countess; Charles Dance, a lord; Jeremy Northam as the then-famous actor-playwright-composer Ivor Novello, and Bob Balaban as a visiting Hollywood producer.

What a promising feast. But it turns out to be Barmecidal. *Gosford Park* runs 137 minutes and spends two-thirds of that time introducing the many characters and providing a snippet of tease about each that is supposed to make him or her interesting. But during that long stretch all that really holds us is the bombardment by this high-powered cast—so many distinguished actors as hosts and guests being served by other distinguished actors as staff. The very shine of the cast, more than the smart talk of the upstairs folk and the gritty talk of the staff, leads us to expect big doings. Such actors, we think, must have been assembled for something extraordinary. We wait and we wait. Then, after we have been around stately Gosford Park many times, as if we were searching for the beginning of the story, the huge star-studded contraption dwindles into a trite murder mystery. And even that mystery is poorly handled. There has been no suspense, no worry about crime; it simply happens. After another good while, we get the explanation, wordily. Then, like the house guests, we depart.

For naught have we been reminded of *The Shooting Party* and *The Remains of the Day*. For naught have we been applying what in billiards is called body English to this English tale, trying to make it tilt into some drama, some significance. It simply disintegrates.

The original idea (rarely have those two words been more misused) came from Robert Altman, who directed, and Bob Balaban, who probably thought up the Hollywood role for himself. The screenplay is by Julian Fellowes, who was trapped in that original idea. The presiding genius—thus esteemed by many—was Altman, who has struck me through most of his career as egotistically tricky. In blunt contrast, his new film is devoid even of trickery. It simply glides along like many another weekend house party picture. Altman just keeps the camera moving as much as possible. Andrew Dunn's cinematography uses a good deal of light-and-shadow contrast in the downstairs sequences but is otherwise undistinguished.

The only nourishment in this non-feast comes from some of the performances. Michael Gambon is brutally sensual in an aristocratic way. Maggie Smith skillfully spoons up still more airy boredom. (How does Smith remember which film she is in?) Smith's maid, played by Kelly Macdonald, has more color than her mistress. Jeremy Northam seems as quietly amused as Novello himself to be part of this tedious party. Alan Bates runs the household adequately in his patently dyed black hair. Helen Mirren gives her role of the housekeeper more genuine pathos than it deserves, and so does Eileen Atkins as the kitchen chief. With Atkins, I couldn't stop thinking that she was the co-author of the television series *Upstairs, Downstairs*, and I kept wondering what she thought of this derivative. (Atkins once told me that her father had been valet to the Spanish ambassador in London and had to iron the *Times* every morning to get the folds out and to keep the ink from staining his master's hands.) The unique Stephen Fry comes along late in the story as a police inspector and spins a nice little comic turn, though I wondered if an inspector would light his pipe just before entering an aristo house and would keep puffing on it as he questioned people.

These actors and their colleagues are too good for this film. Altman's cleverest touch was to engage them so that we would be misled.

Iris

11 February 2002

The people who made the film about Iris Murdoch began with several handicaps. Obviously no film could deal adequately with her ideas in philosophy, a subject that she taught and wrote about through most of her life; nor could it convey the texture of her novels. These limits would apply to any film about an intellectual and artist; but the handicap increases in *Iris* for the very reason that Murdoch was chosen as the subject. The mature Murdoch sickens with Alzheimer's, declines, and dies. This is not drama, it is certainly not tragedy; it is calamity.

To judge by the result, which is gripping, the filmmakers foresaw all the difficulties. They knew that they could only sketch the mind and art of the woman, but they had to do it sufficiently to support her position in the world; and they had to devise a means to make the slow detrition more than a sickbed watch. The screenplay is intelligent in both regards. Derived from the two books that John Bayley published about his wife—one while she was dying, the other after her death—this screenplay was written by two extraordinary men, unusually connected. One of them was Richard Eyre, who also directed the film and who is co-author of *Changing Stages*, a history of British and American theater in the last century. This book, in its course, discusses the plays of Charles Wood and says of him, "There is no contemporary writer who has received so little of his deserved public acclaim." Eyre's collaborator on this screenplay was Charles Wood. (Wood's screenplay experience reaches back to *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *The Knack*, and that neglected gem *How I Won the War*.)

What Eyre and Wood have done to make the film dramatic is simple and thematically central. They have continuously juxtaposed Iris's early adult life in the 1950s—her meeting with John Bayley, their love and their marriage—with the old marrieds of the 1990s. From the very start there are two Irises and Johns: the film's first shot shows the young pair swimming nude in the Thames near Oxford, and in the next shot they are swimming "today" in swimsuits.

It would verge on the coarse to say that the present-day story is interwoven with flashbacks, just as it would be equally coarse to say that the early story is interwoven with flash-forwards. Eyre and Wood have situated their film in two time strata, and though this device is hardly novel in itself, it is used here for a unique purpose, the quintessence that underlies the film. This binary form lifts the film past the account of John and Iris, past any exploitation of her illness, to large inclusiveness. As we watch, we sense that, moving as their story is, it is not only their story. It is concerned with the awesomeness of life for everyone, the promises of the young posed against the whims of fate, the iron disregard with which time and chance sweep all of us along. Alzheimer's disease is not terrible here because it happens to an admired novelist and because it racks the admired literary critic who is her husband. It would be obscene to think that Murdoch's case was especially harsh because it happened to a brilliant person. Certainly no film would have been made of her if she had not been famous, but the film that her fame instigated eventually tells us that her fame is irrelevant. All of us, we can see, are borne by a current in which Alzheimer's is only one possible swirl, and the fame of the victim, if it exists, is only a toy of pathos.

Eyre, as director, seems always to have this idea in mind, as he knits the energies of the young pair with the cozier energies of their long married life. One moment in particular crystallizes this overall view. After the older Iris begins to deteriorate mentally, she goes for an encephalogram. When the X-ray is shown on the screen and a doctor's voice fixes the certainties, the film suddenly cuts back—to the young Iris arching through the water, nude, lovely, moving unknowingly but inevitably toward that encephalogram.

But it would serve *Iris* ill to hang it only with crepe: let there also be garlands. The film is self-evidently grave, but it is not lachrymose. Almost every moment in both time strands is thoroughly realized, as if that moment of life and living were being saved, not filmed. Eyre, who ran the Royal National Theatre for ten years, is an expert and graceful director. His non-theater directing has mostly been in television, though he has made a few films, and he knows how to work up close without crowding. And he relishes humor. The young Iris turns up for lunch one day at a man's house with John in tow. Obviously the man had expected a lunch with her alone, followed by a long afternoon en lit, but must now force himself to welcome the other guest. The host's irritation is conveyed without a word but with our accompanying chuckles.

We can guess that Eyre had a dream cast in mind when he first contemplated this film, and for some ridiculously lucky reason the dream came true. The older Iris is played by Judi Dench. If anything needs to be added to that sentence, it is only that, as the clouds begin to darken Iris's mind, Dench suggests that, inside her being, the original marvelous Iris knows she is being imprisoned. This may or may not be a clinical possibility, but it is a Dench achievement. The younger Iris is Kate Winslet, whose career has been mixed but who has clearly showed, even in such misfires as *Hideous Kinky* and *Holy Smoke*, that she has deep resources and a power of truth. Here we can see that she is the first English actress since Emma Thompson to approach the latter's transformation of verve and daring and intellect into attributes of sex. (Remember Thompson in *Carrington*.)

Jim Broadbent, long an endearing actor (one instance: W. S. Gilbert in *Topsy-Turvy*), plays the older John with a touching stammer and donnish tenderness. The screenplay wisely gives him one dissonant scene: lying in bed next to his sleeping, mentally remote wife, he remembers her sexual wanderings when young, and he

bursts out in tearful anger at her. After this, he is again tender, even more credibly so. Hugh Bonneville, as the young John, has his aims fixed for him by Broadbent. He must be as much like the man who is to come as he can be: and he succeeds, with the loving bewilderment, the intellectual linkage, the appreciative awe of the older John.

In some of Iris's younger scenes and in her still-lucid ones later on, she speaks, at lunches and in lectures, of the mind as the source of freedom and of words as the vessels of thought. Samples of her ideas were necessary, but occasionally these lines, which I take to be quotations from Murdoch, are a bit heavily planted as contrasts to what will happen to her. Also, Murdoch's stature as a novelist is somewhat exaggerated. Well, Dr. Johnson said that "in lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath"; and I suppose that, in a comparable situation, neither are screenwriters. More important are the moments that vibrate in memory. One of them is the early scene in which the young pair are bicycling in the country. She races ahead, and John speaks—the first line of the film. "Wait for me, wait for me, Iris," he calls. It could almost be the picture's motto.

Russian Ark

16 February 2002

An oddity recurs. When Alexander Sokurov's *Mother and Son* was released in the United States in 1998, I found myself disagreeing with several serious critics yet, in an important way, agreeing with them. It was not a matter of simple dissent. Clearly, this Russian director was a unique, impressive talent: but I couldn't agree that *Mother and Son* was a completely realized work. Here I am again, pulled two ways, about Sokurov's new film *Russian Ark*.

First, I note that any comment about Sokurov's art is, in this country, ridiculously ill-based. Now fifty-one, he has made thirteen feature films and twenty documentaries, yet aside from showings at festivals and other special occasions, *Russian Ark* is only the second of his films to be seen in the United States. A further oddity: though both those films left me troubled, I'm eager to see more. Sokurov's "incompletions" are more interesting than many well-polished items.

The most striking, and most publicized, aspect of *Russian Ark* is that its ninety-six minutes are shot in one long take. There is no editing whatsoever. This is now possible technically because of digital videotape; previously every shot in every film was arbitrarily limited to twelve minutes, the length of a film reel. (The Hungarian master Miklós Jancsó was thus limited in such pictures as *The Round-Up* and *The Red and the White*, which are mostly composed of twelve-minute shots. Surely he would have made these films in one continuous shot if it had been technically possible.) Sokurov's one long take is not a technically permitted stunt: it is ultimately the film's aesthetic being.

At the start the screen is black, and we hear a man's voice saying, according to the subtitles, "I open my eyes, and I see nothing." Well, we never see this man. (The voice is Sokurov's, we are told.) We are inside the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, which shimmers with magnificence. Before us soon appears a figure in nineteenth-century dress—a French marquis, as we learn—who acts as cicerone for the unseen twentieth-century visitor who remains figuratively inside the camera. We begin a journey through the galleries and halls of this breathtaking museum. But this is no mere guided tour. The Hermitage, as we see it, is inhabited by people from different periods in the last three centuries, not arranged chronologically. The first group is in

eighteenth-century masquerade dress, chattering their way to a party; another group is in modern clothes; and so on. As people from different parts of those centuries visit the resplendent galleries, as they admire the paintings, attend concerts, converse, flirt, argue, wonder, Sokurov weaves a fabric not of sequential history but of continual habitation, the persistent presence of Russians.

His use of his actors supports the feeling that we are moving, without program, through strata of society. His glances at Catherine II and Peter the Great and the very last czar are like warrants of pastness, and the film's finale, the last royal ball in 1913, is the most poignant such gala I have seen on film since Visconti's *The Leopard*. The music, most of it conducted by Valery Gergiev, is so sumptuous that we almost loll on it. Tilman Büttner, the cinematographer, used Steadicam equipment throughout, which made his camera portable. Figuratively he transforms that camera into the unseen visitor from the present who is sampling social history.

Sooner rather than later, we become aware of the film's unbroken flow, and we feel this motion itself adding to the interest of what we look at. Being carried along by this flow is something like the growing excitement of music that is moving to and through its coda. The very being of the film grows out of this momentum, and the last shot justifies its title.

But it is that selfsame motion, that gradual sweep, that raises questions. What would the film be without it? What is there intrinsically in the film that would grip us if it had been made—even excellently made—in the usual edited manner? We sample a lot of scenes that in themselves have no cumulation, no self-contained point. They merely become an aggregation. The ancient form-versus-content issue doesn't really apply here. Substantively there is no content. Everything we see or hear engages us only as part of a directorial tour de force. That force is exceptional, but since there is not much more to the picture, it leaves us hungry.

A further discontent. This film about the Hermitage and its visitors through the centuries is apparently meant to encapsulate what Russia has been and has cared about. But, except for the few modern visitors, everyone in the film is in the social range from gentry up to royalty. Where is there even a hint of Russia's entirety? Not necessarily its peasants, who didn't frequent museums, but the millions other than the elite who did. This ark has a very selective passenger list. No room on board for any lesser person, no hint (even in the paintings we see) of what is called loosely but handily the Russian soul. One matter seems certain: this would not have been the ark of Russia if the film had been made before 1991. The political change at that time is hardly regrettable, but the implications of the change mark Sokurov's film.

Minority Report

22 July 2002

Science is frequently the lesser part of science fiction. Contemporary science is the launchpad for extrapolations, but the whole enterprise is usually wrought as a means to comment on society or politics or human nature or human destiny. H. G. Wells said that he wrote *The Time Machine* as a "fantasy based on the idea of the human species developing about divergent lines," and when he discussed the novel with Theodore Roosevelt in the White House the president didn't talk about the devices of time travel, he concentrated on the Wellsian concept of future society. Examples proliferate: Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Clarke's *Childhood's End*, and Pohl-Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* are only three more of the numberless

instances that have made science fiction less a prediction of science to come than a genre of satire or doom or tantalizing hope.

Here, to support this view, is *Minority Report*. Steven Spielberg made it—from a screenplay by Scott Frank and Jon Cohen based on a Philip K. Dick story (unread by me)—and Spielberg was more interested in the theme of the piece than the science. He deals dashing with the plentiful scientific gadgets in the story, but, as in his last film, *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, which also was science fiction, the gadgets are the route to the gist.

The place is Washington, the year 2054. Except for the automobiles and some additional skyscrapers, the place doesn't look greatly different. The story centers on a new government bureau, the Department of Precrime, which operates only in the city but is intended to become national. It has a corps of cops—individually airborne via special backpacks—who are alerted to a murder that is about to be committed, and then speed to the scene to keep it from happening. The homicide rate in D.C. has plummeted.

Since this idea prompted the film, let us examine it before we look at the film itself. The concept of crime prevention is not new and of course it is, in the abstract, desirable. How often we read of murders that were committed by people who had been suspect for various reasons yet were set loose by authorities. How often the murderers are mental cases inadequately diagnosed and then released. But aren't there legal and other reasons to question this pre-crime procedure? For prime instance, such procedure is closely akin to action under a bill of attainder, legislation that permits the imprisonment of a suspect without a trial, a kind of law that is prohibited under the Constitution. This film's new bureau has presumably filled prisons with people who have not actually committed crimes. Such a procedure raises profound conflicts between authoritarianism and the "practical" ethics of saving lives. But these questions are hardly hinted at in the film. The only conflicts are rivalries between government groups who want to control pre-crime activities.

The film shows us the method by which the cops get their pre-crime tip-offs. Three people, conditioned by drugs and other means, float in a tank in the bureau's headquarters, inanimate. They are called "pre-cogs"—pre-cognitives—and they are able somehow to receive messages about murder plans in people's minds. The messages are read in police headquarters by electronic means, and the cops speed off through the air to forestall the crimes.

Even in the currency of science fiction, the fragility of this device, its sheer silliness as the basis of an entire government bureau, does considerable harm to *Minority Report*. The film's protagonist, the chief pre-crime cop, has joined the force out of deep emotional motives; but the chance to believe in his feelings is vitiated by the hokiness of the procedures in which he has sought solace.

That protagonist, played by Tom Cruise, is named Anderton, a man whose six-year-old son was kidnapped and presumably murdered a few years back and who now devotes his life to preventing murder. After we see him forestall a double killing, he gets tangled in a revelation that predicts a murder committed by himself. (The film's title refers to a secret document that may liberate him from this fate.) Cruise's performance fits the film precisely. In a story full of plot and technical devices that produce effects as needed, Cruise produces tones and facial expressions as needed. No truly realized man exists within them. Admittedly, Cruise is strapped to a set of arbitrary actions that bully our belief. The script simply hustles him from one Big Scene to another, and he does his best to fill the moment with the prescribed

ingredients. We can be thankful that he has diminished the number of his trademark smiles: still, his performance seems as tacked together as the screenplay.

How did Anderton find the hothouse in which an elderly woman is puttering, a woman who is a retired scientist and who explains matters to him—and to us? (The woman is magisterially played by Lois Smith.) How did Anderton find the surgeon who changes his eyes so that he has a new retinal identity? These Big Scenes and others are administered like doses of tonic to keep our interest warm. (Note: since there are no love scenes in the film, Spielberg apparently thought it necessary to affirm Cruise's sexiness by having Smith kiss him on the mouth and by having the surgeon's buxom assistant grab his ass.) One of those doses seems misplaced—a fierce fistfight between Anderton and a competitive FBI agent. That fight occurs fairly early and renders some of what follows post-climactic.

The highways and freeways, the interiors of offices and factories and laboratories, are futuristic projections. The production designer was Alex McDowell, who, I'm sure, collaborated closely with Spielberg. Whoever, singular or plural, was responsible, the designs of places and devices are ingenious: they deserve a place in the roster of futures in sci-fi films. One of the first futuristic films that I remember, *Things to Come* (1936), based on a Wells novel, led to a long series of designers' futures that are sometimes more interesting than what happens in them. I wonder why, in the long series of books that look at the history of film from various angles, there has not been a picture book of these futures. McDowell ranks high, and his work is treated sensitively by the distinguished cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, who keeps his palette restrained. A bow, too, to John Williams, whose music, leaning just a bit on Schubert and Tchaikovsky, supports or italicizes the action.

Last but, in essence, first, Spielberg himself. Throughout the film he shows his typical cinematic verve—for instance, the opening montage that is sheer legerdemain or the faintly humorous yet grim way in which the flying cops are handled. But *Minority Report* makes me hope Spielberg hasn't caught Kubrickitis. *A.I.*, which was his completion of a Kubrick idea, had all the benchmarks of latter-day minor Kubrick: cinematic and technical dazzle as the real stars, with people as supporting cast. Spielberg's earlier science fiction, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.*, glowed with humanistic concern (especially the first, which seems to me an updating of Henry Adams's "The Dynamo and the Virgin"). *A.I.* was Kubrickian in its monastic quasi-seclusion within the studio and lab, and *Minority Report* has more than a whiff of that aroma. The pioneering British filmmaker John Grierson once said that when good directors die, they become cinematographers. That was long ago: now those directors become technological wizards. Spielberg certainly has the wizardry, but that is not all he has. He can deal with human subjects that are richer and more rewarding than the ones in this long but thematically slender screenplay. I hope that he is not now immured in his filmmaking skills.

Possession

2 September 2002

Alice's comment on her changes in *Wonderland*—"Curiouser and curiouser!"—also fits the changes in Neil LaBute's career. His first two films, *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, were hard, tight anatomies of male chauvinism. His third film, *Nurse Betty*, which he directed but did not write, was quite different: a dreamy portrait of a young woman and her passion for a soap-opera

star. For the theater, more or less simultaneously with the above, he wrote *Bash*, a trio of (his term) “latterday” one-act plays that obliquely exposed cruelty in seemingly bland persons, as well as *The Shape of Things*, a relatively conventional sexual gavotte. Now, back in the film world, he presents still another change: a romance—two in one, in fact. *Possession*, adapted from an A. S. Byatt novel (unread by me), braids a Victorian and a modern love story. Variety certainly is spicing LaBute’s life.

Another novelty: collaborators. LaBute co-wrote the new screenplay with David Henry Hwang, author of *M. Butterfly*, and Laura Jones, screenwriter of *An Angel at My Table* and *Angela’s Ashes*. Obviously we can’t know who wrote what in *Possession*, but the dialogue in each time strand—1859 and now—is apt and taking. Curiously, it is the film’s overall structure that is problematic. Occasionally we get the feeling that a collaborator had concentrated chiefly on the section that was his or her concern, with less attention to the connections.

By now, numerous films have had narratives in different time strands, but the picture that *Possession* reminded me of most strongly was *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1981). LaBute’s lovers, past and present, are not played by the same actors, as was done in the earlier film, but once again modes of relationship are juxtaposed, in part to ask whether there are any constant truths about love. The very fact that the question exists is still disturbing.

The stories in *Possession* grow out of literary research. Roland is an American fellowship assistant to a famous British professor. In a London library, he discovers a love letter written by the famous (fictitious) Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash to another (fictitious) poet, Christabel LaMotte. Roland sees that the letter can help advance his academic career, steals it, then goes up to Lincoln to meet a young professor, Maud Bailey, who is, as they say, working on LaMotte. Spurred by the letter, they follow literary trails. Complexities develop between Roland and Maud, and very soon the lives of Randolph and Christabel become visible to us. Both stories grow as the modern pair uncover more and more material about the earlier pair. The affair between the Victorians is much more knotted because Randolph is married and Christabel has a devoted lesbian lover. In fact, one of the film’s ironies is that the troubles of the earlier pair are much more grave than the relatively abstruse troubles of the modern pair, with their contemporary lunges, retreats, and returns generated by today’s views of pride and commitment. Also, we sense that the modern pair is conscious of cliché in their relationship in a way that the earlier pair could not be; so, in a sense, aesthetic judgment affects the way that Roland and Maud behave with each other.

Some episodes in the two stories are creaky—for instance, the modern pair get involved in a cemetery robbery that ends in a fistfight—but, though the joinings are fuzzy, the scenes between each of the two couples are first-class. The Victorians’ language rings melodically, in contrast to the exchanges of the pair today, which are sharp, sometimes quite moving, and often witty. (One morning, after an evening when Roland and Maud started to make love but he decided against it, Roland is quite moody. Maud says, “I wonder what you’re like after you actually do sleep with someone.”) All these scenes are gems in a setting that is lesser.

The moral questions in the contiguous stories are as clear as the differences in courting. With Randolph and Christabel, the question is fidelity—his to his wife, hers to her ladyfriend. With Roland and Maud, the question is ambition versus honesty. Their whole acquaintance is based on theft—first his of the original letter, then they both steal an envelope from a Paris library, something that Randolph and Christabel

would never have done. (Since this Paris theft is blatant, oughtn't the French to have done something about it?)

But the effect of the film is like that of old-fashioned opera: the arias and the duets are affecting even though the overall story is wobbly. Those scenes bloom because the four leading performances are engrossing in themselves. Jeremy Northam (of *The Winslow Boy*) as Randolph and Jennifer Ehle (of *Sunshine* and *Wilde*) as Christabel play their roles as people to whom romanticism is a kind of responsibility. Aaron Eckhart (of LaBute's three previous films) makes Roland unostentatiously attractive, with a miraculously unchanging three-day stubble. Gwyneth Paltrow is enchanting as Maud. When Paltrow assumes an English accent, as she did in *Shakespeare in Love*, she is transformed in every aspect of her acting. (A coincidence of note: the two leading women are daughters of exceptional actresses. Ehle's mother is Rosemary Harris, Paltrow's is Blythe Danner.)

All these performances must owe much to LaBute, who has put them in perfect pitch and pace. His blendings of past and present settings are dexterous. For instance, Maud and Roland, in search of Randolph-Christabel material, are driving along, go beneath a railroad underpass, and leave the screen. The camera then pans up to the tracks above, where an 1859 train is chugging along. The story continues in a railway car with Randolph and Christabel. Luckily for the film, the cinematographer was Jean-Yves Escoffier, who apparently knows the kind of Victorian painting (as in *Caillebotte*) that transforms a street scene into a theater moment; here Escoffier continues the process. The production designer was Luciana Arrighi, who did *Howards End*, *The Remains of the Day*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, and who once again entrances us. Claire Simpson, veteran editor for the fiercely different Oliver Stone, moves subtly and gracefully here. The composer Gabriel Yared (*The English Patient*) writes particularly well for the anguished Victorian scenes.

These gifted people, and more, have produced a film full of attractions. If it isn't completely realized, those attractions are still treasures.

Igby Goes Down

7 October 2002

Much has been said about the Salinger quality of *Igby Goes Down*. True enough, but there is one resemblance that struck me especially. In the late 1940s I admired the stories that Salinger published and looked forward to his novel. When I saw the first announcement, my heart sank. "*The Catcher in the Rye*," I moaned. "What a terrible title. The book will never go." I would like to be equally correct about *Igby Goes Down*, which, too, has a terrible title.

Burr Steers, who wrote and directed *Igby*, comes from the upper crust of American society and has added smartly to the small but growing body of films about the crusted, especially the younger ones. In fact, Steers, who has also done some acting, was in a previous slice of that crust, Whit Stillman's *The Last Days of Disco*. Igby himself is a bit younger than the disco crowd—seventeen. He is a sort of updated Holden Caulfield, and, something like Holden, he is bouncing around prep schools. He is now at a military academy where he also bounces. (His name is actually Jason: Igby was the name of a childhood toy bear on which misdeeds were blamed. The name has clung to the boy.)

The film's first moments establish its eccentric view, a discomfitingly comic view that becomes its chief verity. We hear a whistling snore, and the camera pans to

a woman asleep in a large bed. She, we learn, is Mimi, mother of the two boys who are at her bedside, Igby (as a child) and his older brother Ollie. The sons slip a cellophane bag over Mimi's head and tie a towel around her neck. She doesn't die, but this escapade is a sample of the relationships in this family—not the usual squabbles of family war, but high-flown, velvet-lined hatreds that continually approach the drastic. Add that the father of the family, whom we soon meet, is a far-gone alcoholic almost imploring insanity to hurry up and rescue him from the world, and the film's terrain is in sight.

That opening episode is sometimes referred to, via flashback, in the main stratum of the film, which is set in the present, with Igby in military school, sort of, and Ollie at Columbia University. Igby's discontent, which has been with him since childhood—a loneliness that persists even when he is with others—is nourished by adolescence and drives him into adventures in Manhattan's Tribeca. His exploits inevitably entail his brother, his mother, and her companion, the sons' ultra-rich godfather, who is a real estate Inca. Igby, bright, perceptive, chafed by a demon of discomfort, slides from one oasis of pot or sex or prank to another, little concerned with what used to be the classic interest of the young—the future. He lives today, popping pills and boffing, with only an occasional verbal obeisance to the rest of his life ahead of him.

Thus his character is not dazzlingly different from other discontented adolescents in films, but Igby is particularly engaging because he is so deeply lost, so deeply greedy about the world, surrounded by characters in lofts or luxe apartments who are for the most part devoid of credible sympathy or love. And he has been drawn by Steers with a large dollop of wry wit. For instance, Igby tells a girl that he is supposed to go to New Jersey but has been putting it off. She says, "That's procrastination." He says, "Not to go to New Jersey is not procrastination."

The story has some surprises, but fortunately not too many. Matters end more or less in the way they have been grimly or ridiculously tending, and Igby emerges possibly tempered, possibly not. What hangs on the viewer is the sense that, give or take some details, this sort of mental and moral testing is a passage that many young people must now traverse, a passage most hazardous for the most sensitive.

Kieran Culkin is perfect as Igby. Not a moment of his performance is self-conscious, even when self-consciousness is enthralling Igby himself. Susan Sarandon is haughty and affectionately cruel as Mimi; Ryan Phillippe satisfies as Ollie; Claire Danes is nicely malleable as a girl who gets involved with both brothers. A revelation is Jeff Goldblum's solidity as the smiling, monstrous real estate tycoon. The boozed-out father has some scenes, rather than a character, and Bill Pullman handles them with resigned bewilderment.

The film is made visually luxurious, just enough, by the cinematography of Wedigo von Schultendorff, who did Woody Allen's *Hollywood Ending*. Steers directs with assurance and without trickery. Presumably his insights are behind all the performances, and they impress. In all, Steers has insured that this teenage film will be recognizable to teenagers but not limited to them.

Safe Conduct

4 November 2002

In *Cinema of Paradox*, her invaluable study of French filmmaking during the German occupation, Evelyn Ehrlich writes:

Amidst the despair of military defeat, the French cinema needed to prove to itself and to the world that France was not dead. To go on making movies of substance and stature was to affirm that the French spirit had survived. During the four years of German occupation, the French produced more than 200 feature films. Many were enduring works of art that continue to be viewed and discussed today. . . . A relatively liberal film policy met the Germans' immediate needs to pacify the French.

This odd situation is the subject of Bertrand Tavernier's *Safe Conduct*. There is no such person as the most French of modern French filmmakers; still, it is not bothersome to think of Tavernier that way. He has spent much of his directing career, which began in 1973, in two ways: relishing the fact that he is French and slashing at French injustices, shortcomings, and stupidities. He began with a gem, *The Clockmaker*, and, among many others, he has since made such unique and excellent films as *Let Joy Reign Supreme*, *The Judge and the Assassin*, and *It All Starts Today*—all of them exceptional cinema, all very loving and angry. Yet, curiously enough, this new picture about the occupation years is less critical of his countrymen.

With the usual penetrating hindsight, we can see that the subject of French film under the Germans was inevitable for Tavernier. He was born in 1941 (his father was the poet René Tavernier), and he matured in the company of film people of that period. In fact, when he came to make *The Clockmaker*, he engaged the screenwriters Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, who had worked together through the war years. After Bost's death, Aurenche continued to work with Tavernier. The director certainly heard and absorbed much about the early 1940s from them and others, and it seems natural that he would want to treat a period that included some of the best and some of the strangest elements in French film history.

Aurenche is one of the two leading characters in *Safe Conduct*. (The man himself died in 1992.) In this screenplay by Tavernier and Jean Cosmos, Aurenche is portrayed—accurately, we must think—as a high-spirited, casually industrious young screenwriter whose mode of defying the Germans, besides abstaining from pro-German subjects, was to live as pleasurably as possible. In the first sequence, which takes place early in 1942, the proprietor of a small Paris hotel hustles other guests out of sight so that a glamorous film star can arrive discreetly for a rendezvous with Aurenche.

Contrasted with Aurenche is Jean Devaivre, a young assistant director (whom Tavernier knew decades later). Devaivre, married and a father, is perilously involved in the Resistance. Both of the young men work for Continental Films, a company that, as everyone knows, is German-financed. German supervisors are in the offices and often in the studios, but they are clever enough not to impose pro-German propaganda on the films that Continental makes: they are concerned chiefly with production schedules and expenses.

The account of Aurenche's extraordinary ability to remain free-spirited eventually winds to a secondary place in the film. Precedence goes to Devaivre's exploits with the Resistance, which he manages while maintaining his studio job. But the real story, the real center of the film, is its atmosphere. Ehrlich's "paradox," the fact that these men and women managed to keep film going under the Germans despite the conquerors' presence—and in a certain bitter way because of it—is the core of the picture. People whose names ring for anyone acquainted with the period are involved to one degree or another—Bost, Tourneur, Clouzot, Autant-Lara, Delannoy, Cayatte, Le Chanois (who eventually is arrested when the Germans

discover that not only is he a Communist, but his real name is Dreyfus). I missed Marcel Carné, who made what is generally considered the best film of the period, one of the best of all French films, *Children of Paradise*.

Know these names or not, the picture is rich. Small and larger touches nourish it. An assistant runs onto the studio floor when German officials are arriving to gather butts in an ashtray so the officials won't know that the French have cigarettes. Then there is Charles Spaak, who co-wrote *Grand Illusion* with Jean Renoir in 1937 and is now working for Continental. Spaak is arrested in 1943 because his brother is in the Resistance and the Gestapo wants information. Thus in a wartime cell sits the co-author of an anti-war masterpiece. But there is more to this incident. Spaak was in the middle of a screenplay, and, as Ehrlich quotes him: "One day two members of the Gestapo appeared, asking me very politely if I would finish work [on the screenplay]. I asked for several things—food, cigarettes, books. They agreed to all my conditions. Every three days, through the bars, they came to collect three or four pages of the scenario." Tavernier makes the most of it.

The cast could not—one could almost say need not—be improved. Jacques Gamblin as Devaivre and Denis Podalydes as Aurenche enliven their characters. (Only one question about the casting: I wonder why Tavernier chose two actors who resemble each other rather closely.) Marie Desgranges charms as Madame Devaivre, and Marie Gillain is nicely kittenish as that French-film standby, the bordello girl with the heart of gold. Apparently she was really in Aurenche's life, though he might not have accepted her in one of his scripts.

Tavernier directs with a surety so quickly apparent that it is in itself a pleasure. Speed without rush is the hallmark of his work here—many tracking shots, much succinct cutting. The speed was needed for at least one reason: the picture runs 170 minutes as it is. It never drags, but it sometimes distends. Some of the sequences along the way are not essential. (Devaivre's bicycle accident, for instance, and his conversation with the truck driver who helps him. The plot detail discussed could have been handled otherwise.) But the whole film is so confidently accomplished, and with such savor, that it would almost be a pity to lose the incidentals.

I know of no other picture on this subject. (François Truffaut's *The Last Metro* deals with a Paris theater under the occupation and, despite its plot complications, is superficial.) *Safe Conduct* is subtle yet clear, empathic yet rigorous, as it dramatizes the basic paradox: to make the occupation seem beneficent, the Germans wanted French films to prosper as French films. None of those films, says Ehrlich, "provided any direct support for the Germans." Those who now think that these film people should have stopped work in order to impede the German state must also consider whether doctors and plumbers and teachers should also have stopped work for the same reason. Tavernier seems to proceed from this point of view, without evasion but with comprehension. And suffusing it all is his almost palpable love of the very world of French film. This picture deals with one period of it, he might say, that's all.

Frida

18 November 2002

Julie Taymor won a high reputation in the theater as a designer—breathtaking, humorous, humane. She seemed not to be competitive with other designers; her work was wonderfully unique. In time she began to direct the productions she designed. In further time she both designed and directed *The Lion King*, which changed her from a

(mere) exceptional artist to a nugget of uranium. She was then given the means to make her first film.

Taymor had once done a theater production of *Titus Andronicus*, and her first film was a cinematic version called *Titus*. It made me miserable. It reminded me of my book-publishing days, when sometimes a graphic artist would bring in a jacket design with clever arrangements of letters and spaces and forms—and only one drawback: you could not read the words. *Titus* was full of enticingly strange shots and lighting and camera movement. Its trouble was that it harried and hampered Shakespeare's text, characters, action. A powerful actor, Anthony Hopkins, played Titus, and it seemed as if once again he was confined within Hannibal Lecter's mask.

Thus the news that Taymor was making a film about the Mexican artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera did not make the blood tingle, especially since there had been a previous film on the subject—by Paul Leduc in 1984—that was mired in artiness. But the miracle happened. Many elements of *Frida* are extraordinary, but the prime marvel is that Taymor has, so to speak, turned the film over to her actors. Not often has a designer-director, from Gordon Craig to today, conceived a production as a means to let actors flourish. More often than not, the designer-director has seen his cast as (Craig's term for actors) *Übermarionetten*. But in *Frida*, which is about characters or is about nothing, Taymor has worked toward and for the acting.

She is rewarded. The two chief performances are splendid, and almost all the others are good. Salma Hayek, born in Mexico, has had twenty years of experience there and in the United States, but nothing of hers that I have seen before, attractive as she is, promised the Frida Kahlo in this film. Hayek begins with the wayward, imaginative, "difficult" adolescent, politically radical, in Mexico City in 1922. A few years later Frida is in a dreadful bus accident, and after recovering from grave injuries she finds an outlet for her inner turmoil in painting. Brashly she takes some of her work to the famous Diego Rivera. He, amused by her daring (an amusement heightened by her beauty), agrees to look at one painting if she will leave it with him. Later he comes to her place to look at more, and is impressed by them and by her. He is twenty-one years older; still they become lovers and, in 1929, they marry. (Later they divorce and eventually re-marry.) Through all of this, Hayek is fiery and lavender and proud and vulnerable. She presents a Frida who is liberated not only in art but in sex, and, through Rivera, is thoroughly immersed in the Marxism that had already attracted her.

Oddly enough, Hayek's own fine performance depends, as does the whole film, on Alfred Molina's performance as Rivera. He is superb. Large, heavy, swift, he creates a Rivera who sometimes has a touch of the casual about both his genius and his libido, and who is unfailingly serious about only one matter: his communism. His murals are emblematic of the sufferings, the harassed life, of the peon. Trotsky said of Rivera: "In the field of painting, the October Revolution has found her greatest interpreter not in the USSR but in faraway Mexico." Taymor's film is hardly propaganda for the Octobrists: it would simply be jejune if it modified Rivera's politics. (Trotsky himself demonstrated that one can admire a great artist without endorsing his political views: see his essay on Céline.) Molina's performance is holistic. He gives us an ebullient, passionate man, an Atlas on whom rests the credibility of Frida's love and politics and the entirety of her world.

The screenplay is by four people, Clancy Sigal among them, and is based on a book by Hayden Herrera. The story follows the initial and recurrent happiness of the lovers, as well as Rivera's recurrent infidelities. When Frida objects, he asks her to regard a fuck as nothing more than a handshake. She then has her own adventures and

gets a chance to return his remark. Her escapades are sometimes lesbian, including an interlude with a woman who has also been Diego's mistress. And Taymor features a slinking tango that Frida dances with a gorgeous woman, a reminder of the tango of Stefania Sandrelli and Dominique Sanda in *The Conformist*.

But the turbulent sexual lives of Diego and Frida, though engagingly steamy, are far from the whole of the film: their artistic and political beings take them further. Frida wins recognition of her own gifts. (André Breton likened her paintings to "a ribbon around a bomb.") In 1933 Diego and Frida go to New York, where Nelson Rockefeller has commissioned him to paint a mural in the new Rockefeller Center. In this mural, called *Man at the Crossroads*, Rivera includes a portrait of Lenin. Rockefeller demurs; Diego refuses to alter the mural; Diego is paid off; his art is removed. In 1937 Trotsky and his wife, in flight from Stalin's assassins, find asylum in Mexico City, first as guests in the Rivera home, later in a nearby house. Trotsky is attracted to Frida, and they have at least one sexual encounter. Trotsky making love—there is a sight to remember! (In the film's one mediocre performance, Geoffrey Rush plays Trotsky with little of the resonance that Richard Burton gave the man in *The Assassination of Trotsky*.)

In subsequent years, Frida begins to suffer physical troubles, apparently at least partly the aftereffects of her youthful accident. Then follows a long and painful slippage into death, while she continues working as best she can. The strappings and operations and corsetings are memorialized in many of her paintings, sometimes symbolically. Taymor often treats those paintings as if they were alive and were responding to our scrutiny of them.

The film score by Elliot Goldenthal, Taymor's frequent collaborator, is consistently helpful. The lush production design is by Felipe Fernández del Paso, who, we can feel, had the advantage of working for an eminent designer. Rodrigo Prieto's cinematography has lighting and color that are beautifully apt for a film about two painters. Taymor indulges in some stylistic pirouettes in her directing, but for the most part she simply pursues the story. (The special effects with Frida's paintings are her most memorable directing "touches.") She succeeds in the risky business of credibly portraying artists largely because she omits theatricalized moments of inspiration. She clearly foresaw that the true being of Frida was in the reality of two exceptional people making their way, with their gifts, through their circumstances—a common enough struggle of artists, but here exacerbated by physical troubles and the political strife in this time and place. Taymor's triumph is that her film, despite its distance from us in some ways, is pertinent and enthralling.

Far from Heaven

2 December 2002

Because *Far from Heaven* is modeled on the 1950s style of Douglas Sirk, a few words about Sirk are in order. He is best remembered for melodramas, such as *Written on the Wind* and *All That Heaven Allows*, that were richly upholstered versions of then-current romantic fiction. Through the years, those films have won high critical regard because of Sirk's stylistic triumph over banal material. For instance, a British biographical dictionary called *Makers of Modern Culture*, edited by Justin Wintle, saw fit to include Sirk (right after Georg Simmel!). Says the book: Sirk believed that "melodrama was the ideal genre at that particular historical conjuncture

to express his views on American society. . . . He was arguably the greatest stylist in Hollywood in the 1950s.”

Those views of America were tempered by unusual experience. German-born in 1900, Sirk (originally Detlev Sierk) had a notable early career in high-level German theater as a dramaturg and a director and entered films at the production company UFA in 1933. There he apparently put his classical experience behind him and plunged into melodrama, luxuriantly clothed. The Sirk film that I’ve seen most recently came from that period: his adaptation of Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society*, done for UFA in 1935, which was much less Ibsen than a foretaste of the Hollywood Sirk to come.

He left Germany in 1937 to protect his Jewish wife and, after a difficult hegira, established himself in Hollywood. In time he began to direct the pictures that made him successful with the public and, in further time, with many critics. Whatever one’s opinion of those pictures as whole entities, they were clearly done by a director of experience and skill who tintured his melodramas with subtle irony. After World War II, Sirk went back to Germany and worked again in the theater, but it was the Hollywood episode in his life that brought him into Wintle’s dictionary.

And it is the quality of this Hollywood episode that Todd Haynes—quite openly—tries to replicate in *Far From Heaven*. His screenplay has some similarity to *All That Heaven Allows*: a middle-class woman in her thirties is attracted to her young gardener. But in Haynes’s script, set in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1957, the gardener is black. More updating (as we might call it): the woman’s husband discovers that he is bisexual.

Still, this updating conforms to the 1950s. The gardener’s character is dolled up. When the woman accidentally meets him at an art exhibit, he discourses on modern painting in a way that “justifies” her attraction to him. When she discovers her husband’s passion for men, she and he visit an analyst who plans to treat the homosexuality as an illness that can be cured. Further to set the film in period, there are such predictable touches as the decor of the woman’s home and her clothes and coiffure, along with period automobiles and the glucose score by Elmer Bernstein. All these elements are locked into place by the dialogue, which is old-time soap opera. The domestic conversations of the married couple, the remarks of their two children, are so stereotypical, so typewritten, that we feel that the adult actors are playing parody straight. Even when the wife discovers her husband in a rendezvous with a man, her reactions are neat, powdered, patted with deodorant. I assume that there are varied reactions when people discover a spouse’s bisexuality, but surely this woman’s tidy behavior is not one of them.

Those two leading actors are Dennis Quaid and Julianne Moore. Quaid at least gets the chance to wrestle close to some emotional heat. Moore, exceptionally gifted, uses her gifts here to stay within the behavioral bounds of a *Good Housekeeping* mannequin. Well, even this stricture requires talent of a sort.

Haynes has made previous films that were out of the ordinary, especially *Safe*, in which Moore played a woman haunted by fears of toxins in the environment. Attempting here to be another Sirk, Haynes succeeds chiefly in some camera moves, like the traveling crane shots that give the film a sense of treacly flow. He even uses a crane shot at the close, moving from Moore in her car up a wall to the branch of a tree with blossoms like the ones that the gardener once gave her. But what Haynes lacks is the sense, as in Sirk, that the lurid melodrama is coated with embittered sweetness.

At the last we are left wondering why, in any case, an imitation Sirk was needed, what appetite or interest it might fill. Even with its latter-day (modified)

frankness, *Far From Heaven* is only thin glamour that lacks a tacit wry base. Thus diminished, it can be tagged with a term that Susan Sontag once defined so well that she put it out of circulation: camp.

Rabbit-Proof Fence

23 December 2002

An Australian film called *Rabbit-Proof Fence* seems at first to be about courage. But it goes deeper than that: it nestles in that region where courage is irrelevant. Courage is about choice. This film is about longing, a tribal longing. Ultimately, the tribe in question is mankind.

Three girls in western Australia in 1931 are at the center of this true story. They are so-called half-caste—white fathers, aboriginal mothers. They live with their aboriginal families, in poverty but in completeness. Molly (age fourteen), her sister Daisy (eight), and their cousin Gracie (ten) are abducted by the state. The government has instituted a policy—it lasted from 1905 to 1971—of taking half-caste children from their villages to a government training center where they are taught to become housemaids or farm laborers. These children are taken forcibly, if necessary. The rationale behind this policy, believed to be beneficent, is the belief that, three generations later, the aboriginal strain in the descendants will be winnowed out. White culture, with a kindly smile, will have purged them.

The three girls, with Molly as leader, escape from the training camp, without food or money (though there would be no place to spend it), and start for home. Their village is 1,200 miles away. They are not consciously brave: they just want to get home. Their guide is the rabbit-proof fence that the government has built through this vast territory, which they follow. (Thus the film's title is mildly symbolic.) So the government is both oppressor and unwitting savior. Forth the children plod through bleak, brown, broiling immensity.

Christine Olsen's screenplay is taken from a historical account by Doris Pilkington Garimara. (At the end we glimpse the survivors, now old women.) Factual though the film is, it is hard to understand how the government, searching for the escapees with horsemen and autos, cannot find the children in this otherwise empty 360-degree space. They certainly try. Kenneth Branagh, as the supervising official in Perth, plots with maps like a general, trying to recover the fugitives for Australian culture. But, with bits of help from the few people they encounter, the girls move on. One of them, Gracie, falters and dies. Molly carries her sister piggyback, and after nine weeks they eventually win through. Their mother hides them in the woods because officers are waiting for them. A closing title tells us that Molly later had two girls of her own who had trouble with that governmental program. But apparently all eventually became well.

The aboriginal actors have that strange combination of the mysterious and distant along with the open and sunny. They are creatures proudly from another world who can be absolutely charming in ours. A drama coach helped the girls and obviously put them at ease. The pivotal role of Molly is played by Everlyn Sampi, who is a sturdy, taciturn treasure.

The director, Phillip Noyce, is an Australian who has made assorted films, including two of the Tom Clancy numbers, *Patriot Games* and *Clear and Present Danger*. But Noyce has treated this story almost like a page of holy writ. If he has erred, it is in the very awe of his approach. Many of his shots are from the ground up,

making mural-esque figures of his people. Many, many close-ups show us feet, shod and unshod, trudging across the screen to take us back to earth. One anomalous shot in particular is a small blemish. Toward the end, a helicopter looks down on the two surviving girls in the middle of vast brown space—an intrusive emphasis and a breach of our point of view. The music by Peter Gabriel is incessantly large and exalting: a smaller, lyric score might have been more help.

But the shortcomings do not much dim the appeal of the story—how these three children set out on this enormous journey with nothing to sustain them but their longing for the place where they belonged and for the people they belonged to.

Blackboards

30 December 2002

How disquieting and how important it is to see films from the Middle East. In these days when broad brushstrokes are being used to color countries in that region, it is both salutary and sad to be reminded of particulars underneath those strokes. For a dozen years or so, most of those films have been Iranian and, along with much that was good, have brought us one world master, Abbas Kiarostami.

Here is another Iranian film. *Blackboards* is by Samira Makhmalbaf, who is not—or not yet—a world master but who at the age of twenty is a gifted director. The daughter of the estimable Mohsen Makhmalbaf, she has already made one film, *The Apple*, and her new one marks a considerable advance. The daughter wrote the screenplay in Kurdish with her father but directed on her own.

It is set in Iranian Kurdistan, bare and bleak mountainous country near the border with Iraq. At the start the brown landscape is empty. Then over the brow of a hill comes a slow line of figures who might be mountaineers leading donkeys or soldiers. As they approach, we see that they are nine men, each of whom has a blackboard strapped to his back. They are itinerant teachers, in search of people who want to learn to read and write, and as they trudge, they compare accounts of their success or failure. They hear a helicopter (Iraqi?) and they hide. Then they scatter. One of them, Reeboir (played by Bahman Ghobadi), meets a band of boys, each loaded with a pack. The boys describe themselves as mules, whose job it is to carry smuggled goods over the border. Reeboir decides to stay with them and try to teach as he can.

Another teacher, Said (Saeed Mohamadi), meets a group of at least fifty nomads, Kurdish people from Iraq trying to make their way back home. Said joins them and, in the course of a few days, teaches a little, is married, and offers his blackboard as a stretcher to carry his wife's father, a sick old man. When the nomads cross the border, they kiss the ground. Said and his wife realize that their marriage will not work and are divorced as summarily as they were married. She keeps the blackboard, which was his wedding present to her.

The prime fact about this film is that it exists. Technically, it must have been horrendously difficult, shooting out in the middle of nowhere and maintaining a large company there. Getting the performances must have been equally difficult. Only Mohamadi and Ghobadi seem to be actors (meant here as a compliment). All the others had to be coached out of self-consciousness, and in every instance the director succeeded. Then there was the camera work. Many shots precede the trudging people as they move along the narrow trails—thus some sort of Steadicam apparatus had to

be mounted on some kind of cart to keep ahead of the people walking toward it. Then there are the shots across chasms of lines of people filing along a mountainside.

Yet even these successes would not matter much if they did not help to realize a work of substance. The center of this picture is people's regard for people, tacit but understood, a regard that rests on their religious faith. Like many other Iranian films, *Blackboards* counters the generally broadcast ideas about this part of the world. It is a testament of quiet endurance, of common concern, of reconciled survival.

The Fast Runner

24 June 2002

In the August 9, 1922 issue of *The New Republic*, Frances Taylor Patterson wrote: "In a day of emotional and artistic deliquescence on the screen, a picture with the fresh strength and pictorial promise of *Nanook of the North* is in the nature of Revelation." The screen has recurrently deliquesced since then, and once again comes a film from the north to remind us of that fact by its revelation of strength. Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook* has reigned since 1922 as the best film about Inuit life: now it is joined and in some ways surpassed by Zacharias Kunuk's *The Fast Runner*.

Kunuk was born in a sod house in the Arctic in 1957 and since the age of nine has lived in Igloolik on Baffin Island. Apparently it was in Canadian cities that he studied filmmaking. His cinematographer, Norman Cohn, has been living in Igloolik since 1985 and has worked with Kunuk on numerous documentaries. All the cast of *The Fast Runner* are Inuit. Some of them have had acting experience, most have not. This mixture is not a rarity in filmmaking: most of the cast in Laurent Cantet's *Time Out* were not professionals. But Cantet's pros did not have to come back, as Kunuk's pros did, to immerse themselves in a relatively primitive manner of life.

Nanook was and still is visually stunning because of its incredible expanses of snowy nothingness. *The Fast Runner*, as it begins, almost seems to be picking up this subject with a long shot of a fur-clad man and two dogs surrounded by white immensity. Cohn's cinematography is in color, done with a digital camera: the footage was later transferred to usual stock. Of course the color is a huge asset in itself—which of us, outside of Rockwell Kent, knew that there were so many degrees and tints of white?—but Cohn uses it with a fine sense of relevance. He wants to show us that northern light works wonders in sky and terrain. (In summer, the white is replaced by brown.) Most engaging is Cohn's sculptural use of light on the blunt yet varied Inuit faces.

Nanook is a documentary, and Flaherty was chided for some arrangements that he made. (He built an oversize igloo without a roof so that he could shoot interior scenes. I wondered about the igloo interiors in this new film.) *The Fast Runner* is a drama, based on an old Inuit legend, which, in brief, deals with the rivalry of two young men for a young woman. One of them, Atanarjuat (the fast runner), wins her hand. One spring night he and his brother are sleeping in their tent when they are attacked by the defeated rival and two other men from his tribe. The brother is killed. Atanarjuat then flees naked across the brown terrain, the ponds, the patches of ice and snow, pursued by the three who want to kill him. The chase is long, but Atanarjuat survives, and his survival leads to resolution of tribal troubles.

The performances of all the roles are better than we might have expected. Sincerity pulses throughout, the assurance from these people that they are enacting a legend that is significant to them. Characterizations are hardly complex, but probably

anything more nuanced would have been inconsistent with the general level of conversation, action, decision, all of which are portrayed in figurative primary colors. Family feeling, that most precious of universals, is yet again the foundation of being.

With the stratospheric difference between Inuit lives and ours, it is inevitable that we view this film in some aspects as a travelogue: the way the Inuit fill their seal oil lamps; the way they cook (or don't cook) their food—has any Inuit ever eaten a vegetable?; their comfort as members of small groups, six or eight, in the middle of cosmic space. Kunuk concentrates so wholeheartedly on the story, he is so smitten with love for his people and for their legend, that we are affected as much by his feelings as by the film. He convinces us that, for an Inuit, an Inuit life is complete, even to mime and song and dance. (Their culture includes the tattooing of women's faces.) Kunuk's prime accomplishment is that he actually made this film, that it now exists. It is 172 minutes long, and possibly the early section could be a bit condensed, but it is a not-too-modest epic.

Years ago I showed *Nanook of the North* in a film course, and after this account of courage against natural obstacles had concluded, one young woman in the class said appreciatively, "Nobody ever sends care packages to the Inuit. No one needs to. They're OK." Wherever that young woman is now, I hope that she gets a chance to see *The Fast Runner*.

In the Bedroom

17 December 2002

In his short story "Killings," as in others of his stories, Andre Dubus looks down on his characters like a fairly friendly god, comprehending mortals' troubles with just slight amusement. Dubus, as god, has a uniquely blended view from above, understanding but cool. He lets his characters work through all the anguish, tension, bitterness that they encounter or evolve for themselves, something like animals in mazes, except he knows that they have souls.

Dubus begins "Killings" with the funeral, in a coastal Maine town, of a youth who was murdered by the estranged husband of a woman with whom the youth had been having an affair. The story fixes on the grief of the youth's parents, Matt Fowler, a shopkeeper, and his wife Ruth. The murderer, who is the scion of the local rich family, is out on bail and moves easily around the streets of the town, drinking and seeing women. He will be tried for manslaughter and will probably be out of prison in a relatively short time. These facts fester so furiously in the bereaved Matt that, with the help of a friend, he takes matters into his own hands. (There is no point in being coy about the ending of a story that has been in print for years.) Ruth is quietly pleased. Lynch law has prevailed, and Dubus, even if he pities their agonies, understands from above that he must let these people fashion their own fates according to their size and capacity.

Now Todd Field, a keenly gifted director, has (with the help of Robert Festinger) adapted the Dubus story for the screen with the title *In the Bedroom*. The new title, like the previous one, is unspecific: it could be the title of at least half the plays and films in Western history. Field has kept almost all the elements of the Dubus story, but he has amplified them and, more saliently, has altered the tone. Not for Field the view from above of mortal frenzies: he wants to be close to his people, to bring them near, to register the heat of the fateful love affair, to plunge into the grief of the bereaved parents. With this increased proximity, he decides to "humanize"; he

changes Matt from a storekeeper to a doctor—to give him more concern with people and to make the ending more anomalous. But he does not explain why this doctor has a pistol. (The storekeeper carried it when he made night deposits.) To make the ultimate execution seem more impulse than plan, less malevolent, Field omits the preparations that are in the story, and he omits Ruth's tacit participation in the plot. In sum, Field has lowered the tenor of the story from one of fate, seen from above with Greek inevitability, to a domestic drama.

But—and it's a tremendous but—Field has directed it exquisitely. (He has directed before and has done some acting: he was Tom Cruise's friend in *Eyes Wide Shut*.) From the beginning he underlines apparent simplicities with hidden complications. The very first sequence is misleading, deliberately so. A young man is chasing a laughing young woman through a meadow on a sunny day. (It's New England, and Andrew Wyeth hovers over the scene: indeed, we later glimpse a book about the Wyeths.) He catches her; they tumble and kiss and laugh, and seem immersed in dewy young love. It soon comes as a surprise that, though he is a youth right enough, she is a divorcing wife with two young children. We then recognize that the director wants to show us surfaces that conceal contradictions. The film finishes in the very same vein: the last sequence consists of vistas of a tranquil Maine town where we have seen tranquility fractured.

Field works throughout the picture to blend the just-folks conventionality of individual scenes with a silence that snakes along underneath and that eventually wrenches the story out of homespun platitude into abysses. The two leading characters are Matt, the town doctor, and his wife Ruth, a music teacher at the high school. Theirs is the youthful son, college age, who is having what he himself calls a summer affair with an older woman. His mother, more than his father, is uneasy about the affair. The woman's husband, vain and aggressive and menacing, wants to get his wife back. Violence is threatened, and it arrives. The son is killed. The film then moves into its true subject: the parents' grief—or griefs, for they grieve differently.

We enter the shadows with Ruth and Matt. (There's a hint in the air of Atom Egoyan's film *The Sweet Hereafter*, which also dwelled in this land of shadows.) The couple now seem encapsulated, removed from the world and from each other, as if they were clothed in invisible space suits or deep-sea outfits. Such a moment as when Ruth closes her eyes and leans back in a car while the voices of others continue around her, or when Matt meets a man in the street and the camera closes up on this or that bit of the man's front, an index of how Matt is anatomizing the man as if to wonder why he is still bothering to be alive to talk to this person—such moments are dramas of horrifyingly pure loneliness. The scene in which Matt and Ruth break out of their form-fitted prisons to quarrel, and to cry, only emphasizes their bewilderment about how to go on living now.

On the way to this rupture, the film achieves much. Helped by Antonio Calvache's delicate camera work, Field seems to inscribe his story on skin. I have rarely been so aware of the actual skin of characters' faces. Apparently no makeup was used, and without intent of tabloid-news starkness, each face is presented as a document, freckled, wrinkled, or whatever. Further, Field weaves the life of the town, especially its lobstering, into the story without heavy thumbprints. (One dubious touch: at Matt's regular poker games, one of his cronies quotes Blake and Frost.)

Nick Stahl, as the Fowlers' son, has the headstrong maleness of a young man whose hormones make him take risks. Marisa Tomei, as the divorcing wife, justifies his interest. In the role of Ruth, Sissy Spacek fills every requirement as if she were keeping a promise: nothing is false, nothing is memorable. As Matt, Tom Wilkinson

continues to build a career of largely ignored astonishments. Wilkinson is English, and our relish of his performance does not depend on the fact that an Englishman has caught the Down East accent perfectly. He established his versatility long ago in his own country, from the Marquess of Queensberry in *Wilde* to the prole rowdiness of *The Full Monty*. By now it would have been surprising if he had not given full body to Matt. He is one of those acting treasures who seem quite content to go on being insufficiently appreciated as long as they get sufficient good roles.

In the Bedroom leaves us with the happy knowledge that with Field the American film scene, continually deplored as scraggly, can boast another admirable directing talent. But we can all hope that if his next screenplay is an adaptation of something as good as the Dubus story, he will not well-meaningly “humanize” it down a couple of notches.

About Schmidt

13 January and 3 March 2003

Jack Nicholson’s new film, *About Schmidt*, verifies again what has long been clear. Any future history of American film must, if it is to be adequate, treat Nicholson as more than a star. A box-office draw, to be sure, but unlike most stars, he has done as much in his lifetime as any American screen actor to blazon, in itself, the art of acting. It used to be a theater adage that only great roles—meaning the classics—create great actors. Nicholson has shown that, in an age when the vernacular has become prosody, a great talent can create great roles. Other Americans have done this, such as Henry Fonda, Meryl Streep, and Paul Newman, but Nicholson has so dazzlingly mixed the familiar with the electric, so wonderfully transformed individuals into archetypes, that he forces us to reconsider greatness. If that word means (as I take it to mean) acting at a height that makes superior work in that role unimaginable, then Nicholson has often reached greatness in realistic acting.

Two matters follow. He has shown as well as any actor in our history that film can, at its optimum and with some good luck, be a medium for artistic growth. And he proves that true versatility is fundamentally insight. This actor, whose sheer personality was his mode of entry into fame, proves that, through insight, the asset/burden of personality need not be a bar to surpassing that personality.

About Schmidt is certainly not his last work—another Nicholson film soon arrives—yet this film is so striking a change of venue for Nicholson that it invites a retrospect of his career. He first drew wide attention in 1969 in *Easy Rider*, when he was thirty-two. He had been in a number of plays in the Los Angeles area, but he was essentially a creature of the film world, having made his way up from an office-boy job at MGM through some twenty small-scale films before *Easy Rider*, as actor and writer and producer. The sight of Nicholson in *Easy Rider*, in a football helmet on the back of a motorcycle, smiling his way belatedly into adventure, was like discovering a nugget that promised a rich lode. He lost little time in staking the claim for us.

To date Nicholson has made eighty films. Out of this host I select three roles to exemplify his range. In *Five Easy Pieces*, from 1970, his Bobby Dupea was the tormented incarnation of an artist fleeing the strictures of art for the refuge of ordinary life. The moment in which, alone in his car, he flies into a frenzy at the thought of his obligations is still a thunderclap in memory. (And, not incidentally, in this film he and the woman from the bowling alley have one of the hottest sex scenes outside the porn trade.) As the Joker in *Batman* in 1989, he transformed a *commedia dell’arte* clown

into a writhing menace of modern nightmare. In the title role of *Hoffa*, an excellent 1992 film lost in the distribution shuffle, he created the coarse labor leader, ethically murky in his own life, yet fiercely dedicated to his job—a performance that ought to be one of the many Nicholson examples available in schools of acting. (So many others. The obedient yet quizzical sailor in *The Last Detail*, the morally perplexed reporter in Antonioni's *The Passenger*, the rebellious patient in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* . . .)

As happens with all good actors, to remember the Nicholson gallery while watching *About Schmidt* is to feel that one is expanding one's wealth. This is the second time in a row that he has played a retiree. In last year's *The Pledge* he was a detective leaving the force but getting entangled in another case. Here he is Warren Schmidt, a retiring insurance executive who gets entangled in quite different trouble, the emptiness of his life without his job. Thoreau's most famous line—"the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation"—resounds here as Schmidt realizes that his job has been a drug to keep him from facing Thoreau's chill. In our first glimpse of him, he is seated in his stripped office on his last day, waiting for five o'clock, when he will be free. But he is not free; he is denuded. The small professional smile that he carries with him to the company party in his honor is no defense against the secret fright that drives him out of the party for a drink by himself.

The details of what then happens to Schmidt are exactly that—details. If his uncongenial wife had not suddenly died, if he had not made the long trip to his daughter's wedding where he has to face aspects of himself, other crinkles and wrinkles in dailiness might have been equally scarifying. The role does not quite provide the amplitude that Nicholson could use, yet his Schmidt, grizzled, a bit heavy, gently smiles his way into confrontation with inner bankruptcy. Through a children's aid agency he "adopts" a Tanzanian child, and for \$22 per month he gets some sort of slender purpose in life. In voice-overs, he has the chance to confide to this boy the secrets he wishes he didn't have.

As has sometimes happened in the past, Nicholson's performance is the *raison d'être* of a less than overwhelming screenplay. Alexander Payne, the director, and Jim Taylor have adapted a Louis Begley novel (unread by me) to accommodate Nicholson. I gather that Begley's book is set in upper-class Long Island. The film moves to middle-class generality. Schmidt now lives in Omaha, Nebraska (Payne's hometown), and his new prize possession is a Winnebago motor home. Some of Payne's directing touches are sure. That opening overhead glimpse of Schmidt in his nearly vacant office is like being thrust into a chunk of emptiness. When Schmidt is at his wife's graveside service, he looks at her coffin, then glances upward. Payne then gives us not the smiling heavens but gray sky glimpsed through the bare scraggly branches of an autumn tree.

But some of the matters in the script are out of kilter. In the weeks after his wife dies, Schmidt lets his house get strewn with mess and dirty dishes. This seems a sitcom gag imposed on an extremely orderly man. His Winnebago does not get similarly messed up when he travels in it and the joke has served its turn. Schmidt's advances on a trailer-park woman, the wife of a friendly neighbor, are distressingly incredible.

Still, *About Schmidt* stands as a poignant marker in the career of a major artist. It helps to certify that Nicholson's very charm cannot obscure his eminence. At the least—and there is much more—he has here done again what he has often done before, as with the rigid colonel in *A Few Good Men* or the dissolute astronaut in *Terms of Endearment*: he has transmuted a role into a truth.

I mentioned above that I had not read the Louis Begley novel from which the screenplay was tenuously derived. Several people have told me that, though they liked the film and they had read of Begley's approval of it, I ought to read the book. I'm thinking it over.

Their friendly suggestion is, of course, a return to the perennial question of adaptation, the degree of responsibility of a later work to its source. Every such discussion is a matter of instances, not of precepts. Who cares if an unimportant novel is altered for screen use? Who is not offended when a good book is trashed on screen? The thorn in this prickly matter is the alteration of a valuable novel when the resulting film is also valuable. The thorn is even sharper in this instance because Begley himself said about the screenplay by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor that he "would have been proud to have written their book."

His comment almost states my dilemma. I have in my head one work, a film called *About Schmidt*: do I want in my head a related work in another medium? If I do read the novel and think it as good as my correspondents say, haven't I shoved myself into a small torture chamber that I could have avoided? Since the film is itself of consequence, why do I have to put in my mind an earlier version that, at best, can only make me admire Payne and Taylor's skill in changing it? I have trouble enough in admiring Arrigo Boito's adaptation of *Othello* for Verdi; do I need more such quasi-grudging admiration?

The oldest burden of this kind that I remember is *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. When I was in high school, I read John Buchan's novel of that title and thought it a terrific thriller. Four or five years later, along came Hitchcock's film. I remember being excited that Buchan's book had been filmed by a director already established as a master craftsman. Then I saw the film, and was gripped by it as if two hands were on my shoulders holding me fast. It, too, was terrific. But it didn't even have the (literal) thirty-nine steps in it, and it took some bits from another Buchan novel. In order to justify using the title, the adapters, Charles Bennett and Alma Reville, had made it the name of a spy organization. So in the decades since I have had two versions of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in my head: the original, though I have never re-read it, and the film, which I have seen six or eight times. Because the novel came first and was so strong in itself, I have always had a tinge of discomfort about the film, the thought that it is very good considering that it altered the novel I had loved. Do I need to do that to *About Schmidt*?

The problem arose long before film itself was invented—in the theater. Bernard Shaw's first piece of theater criticism was a review of Henry Irving's *The Merchant of Venice* in 1880. After noting the alterations that Irving had made in the text, Shaw wrote: "Mr. Irving calls his arrangement of *The Merchant* an 'acting version.' What does he call the original?" I'm glad that I couldn't have seen Irving's production: I might very well have admired it and would thus have had to balance Irving against unaltered Shakespeare long before film adaptation added to the problem.

I don't advance an argument against reading. I'm not proposing that the ideal filmgoer is ignorant of every good novel or play that has ever been published and that might be adapted. I suggest only that balance can be difficult if it is necessary, and that sometimes an evasion is a comfort. A film may be well able to stand on its own without comparison to its source. To dwell on changes from the origin can load the film with obligations that may be aesthetically irrelevant. Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs* is drastically different from the medieval *Nibelungenlied*, but do those who know the epic arbitrarily derogate the *Ring* because Wagner departed from the earlier

text? Payne and Taylor don't have to be the equals of Wagner in order for us to allow that a work in one art can stand on its own apart from its source in another art.

In 1926, before sound arrived in films, Virginia Woolf mourned—in the pages of *The New Republic*, by the way—that films spelled out famous novels “in words of one syllable.” Yet she foresaw that “when some new symbol for expressing thought is found, the filmmaker has enormous riches at his command. The exactitude of reality and its surprising power of suggestion are to be had for the asking.” That symbol or series of symbols has been found—indeed, was found before 1926—and has often exalted film adaptations of novels. The exactitude and the power that Woolf desired in films have often overwhelmed us. *About Schmidt* is not a pinnacle in cinema history, but it is certainly good enough, especially with Jack Nicholson's performance, to exist without being primarily considered as an adaptation. Surprisingly, happily, Begley's own statement is a vigorous vote for this view.

Yet I hurry to add that I would not want to surrender the right to criticize adaptations even when the resulting films are good, if such criticism seems relevant. All of the above is only one view of the problem. Scrambling, I might take refuge in Whitman—“Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself”—even though, as he said, he contained multitudes, and I, alas, do not. But, like most other people, I do contain some conflicting opinions, conflicts that I can't resolve. This is one pair.

I'm still thinking it over about Begley.

Gangs of New York

20 January 2003

At last. For thirty years the film world has known that Martin Scorsese, busy though he has otherwise been, was nursing a particular ambition. Now, after much wrangling topped by last-minute disputes with his producer about the film's length, here is *Gangs of New York*. The 168-minute result is complex and unusual, and that comment is of course a hint that the picture is troubling.

It is based on Herbert Asbury's book *The Gangs of New York*, which itself presents a problem. The book (published in 1928) is an account of the horrifying gang wars that raged on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the early nineteenth century; it is neither a novel nor a cursive history, but a collection of violent episodes. All that the book provides, in a large sense, is locale. Scorsese was presented with settings and then had to supply a story to fill them.

The settings themselves were realized by Dante Ferretti, the exceptional Italian artist who designed four films for Fellini and at least three for Scorsese (including *The Age of Innocence*). For financial reasons, *Gangs of New York* was made at Cinecittà in Rome, and there Ferretti created a rabbit-warren New York of the period. The film begins in a large dilapidated building called the Old Brewery, high-roofed with several tiers of ramshackle rooms. When we leave this gloomy interior for the snowy streets, space only emphasizes the closure we have just left, a closure that is like a visual refrain throughout. The costumes by Sandy Powell, costumer of *Miss Julie* and *Shakespeare in Love*, manage to be colorful and expressive yet still look like clothes, not costumes. Michael Ballhaus, the cinematographer, is a master.

But the initial and final requirement was the story, which was supplied by a longtime Scorsese associate, Jay Cocks. He wrote the screenplay, which was later revised by Steven Zaillian and Kenneth Lonergan. Cocks, clearly responding to the

nineteenth-century ambience and the size of the feelings necessary within it, produced a narrative that smacks of Victor Hugo, a melodrama rooted in the ethics and the prejudices of the day. The base of the story is a phenomenon of American immigration, possible only in a new country that was, to crowded and harassed Europeans, bounteous opportunity. A calendar of social stature was soon established. Those immigrants who arrived early looked down on those who arrived later. In this film the Anglo-Saxon Protestants whose families had come to America during the previous century despise and assail the Irish Catholics who begin to pour in during the 1830s. The conflict between the groups was not sheerly religious: it was as if the earlier arrivals claimed territory on which later immigrants were intruding.

Cocks's story starts in 1846 with a furious street battle between an Irish-immigrant horde tired of being bullied and an "American" horde who hate them. The Irish are led by a man called Priest who is or is not one. The fight is a frenzy of stabbings and choppings, no firearms. Priest is killed by the Protestant leader, Bill the Butcher, and his eleven-year-old son is whisked away to a reform school. Sixteen years later, the son, called Amsterdam, returns to this downtown area, hatching revenge for his father's death. He is incognito and, in a nice Oedipal furbelow, becomes almost a foster son to Bill, who killed his father.

We can almost sense Hugo out there in the spirit world, itching to get his hands on this tale of social injustice and blood and delayed retribution. But Hugo, though hardly a streamlined writer, would have kept the tale more consistently dramatic, would have wound it tighter, and would have explained why Amsterdam's close friend betrays his identity to Bill. (And Hugo would have made the romantic interludes more germane, less like interludes.) Most importantly, he would have had a purpose.

The flaw that separates Scorsese's film into its components is its lack of a crystallized theme. At the end there are some utterances claiming that these street struggles led the way to democracy, but these closing comments are hollow. They suggest that Scorsese and his writers belatedly realized that they had to supply a reason for their picture's existence. Possibly to aid these thin pronouncements, the screenplay sanitizes the Draft Riots of 1863, which conclude the picture. Mobs of Irish immigrants rampaged through the streets of New York, incensed by the new Conscription Act, which would send them off to fight in the Civil War to free black people: black men would take the Irishmen's jobs while they were away, possibly to be killed for the sake of those black men. Writes Asbury: "Eighteen Negroes were hanged by the rioters, and about seventy others were reported missing." In the film, all that we see of this catastrophe is a black man being ordered out of a Catholic church and two other black men being murdered. The grim facts are tempered to let these riots, along with the white street battles, become somehow the creators of democracy.

This dimness of point, of theme, leaves us wondering why Scorsese had longed for years to make *Gangs of New York*. The only apparent answer is that it gave him a chance to enlarge *Mean Streets*, his film of 1973 that burrowed into criminality in the Manhattan neighborhood where he had grown up. In *Gangs of New York* he could do it in the same neighborhood, in costume. Although Scorsese has made films in which violence is minor, it is hardly libel to say that most of the time he needs blood to touch him off; and viewers are grateful for this affinity with violence because the Scorsese career is rich. And in this new film he could treat violent material in quasi-operatic style, in the streets of his boyhood a hundred years earlier.

As usual with Scorsese, the picture exults in intrinsic luxuriance. Patently his films are the work of a man who lives in cinema as a bird lives in the sky. He has invested himself with the history of the art in a way that empowers him without making him an imitator. For instance, the overhead shot near the beginning, with the two hordes facing each other, is a reminder of Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*—but with a glow of accrual, not mimicry. More: the violence is set in the credible context of the city around it. The life in the streets is choreography that moves out of a director's patterns into dailiness.

Far beyond that, Scorsese is deft with his principals. As Amsterdam, Leonardo DiCaprio concentrates on the role, not on DiCaprio, and gives it body. Cameron Diaz is perhaps too lovely for a tough pickpocket who is one of Bill's mistresses and becomes Amsterdam's as well, but she too is focused on her role. The structure of the film's performance, however, is built on Bill the Butcher. His is the role we are meant to remember, and Daniel Day-Lewis—with a glass eye, an extravagant moustache, and the granddaddy of all flat American accents—ensures that we will. Bill, smiling, shrewd, ruthless, is a gang emperor who knows that he is larger than life, resplendent in immorality, inflated with the rhetoric of self-dramatization. Day-Lewis, with intelligence and appetite, searches out every exploitable nook in the man. The hero of the picture is Amsterdam, but, as a good Iago can do with a merely adequate Othello, Bill takes over the show.

Amen

10 February 2003

Costa-Gavras, Greek-born and French-nurtured, has spent most of his long career making troublesome films. His chief drive has been political, in the sense of addressing social injustice in various parts of the globe, so his films often have annoyed those who like things the way they are. A little-noted struggle of the last forty years is that, though it couldn't have been easy, Costa-Gavras has managed to get financing—and good actors—for films of limited audience appeal. Sometimes he has even had offers from others to take on barbed subjects. But unsurprisingly, his personally engendered films, such as *Z* (about a Greek assassination) and *The Confession* (about the Prague show trials in 1952), have been better than those originated by others, such as *Missing* (about an American father searching for his son in Chile) or *Mad City* (about American TV exploitation of crime).

Now comes something of an exception. Costa-Gavras's subject this time is the behavior of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust. Presumably he chose the subject himself—it is hard to imagine a producer searching for a director to take it on—yet it lacks the compact, targeted feeling of his best films. This is a pity because it arrives, apparently by coincidence, at a heated moment. I doubt that when Costa-Gavras began *Amen*, he knew that the American scholar Daniel Jonah Goldhagen was working on *A Moral Reckoning*, the currently debated study of the matter, part of which originally appeared in the pages of *The New Republic*.

The source of the film's screenplay, written by the director and Jean-Claude Grumberg, was Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy*. How wry it is to think that most readers who see that title will not recognize it. When the play was produced on Broadway in 1964, after productions in many European cities following its Berlin premiere under Erwin Piscator, it caused—as it had everywhere else—a giant uproar of protest and defense. Francis Cardinal Spellman, the New York prelate, attacked the

play; Catholic laymen urged Mayor Robert Wagner to ban it; defenders flourished praise from Albert Schweitzer, Albert Camus, and (most impressive to me) Pastor Martin Niemöller, who had so courageously defied the Nazis.

The Broadway theater was picketed, but the play was not banned and was soon published. We saw then that the produced version was only about one-fourth of what Hochhuth had written, not abridged for any reason except running time. (The full text would have taken many hours.) The book, too, was widely debated in the press and on television. I was on a television panel with Hochhuth and others and had the uncomfortable job of saying that, though I was glad the play had been written, I wished it had been written better.

But *The Deputy* had moments of tension and heartbreak, and unfortunately the screenplay dilutes them, as it dilutes the thrust of the story. Two characters dominate. One of them is factual: Kurt Gerstein, a chemist who is a German SS officer in 1938, has been helping to supply Zyklon B to the army; when he finds out how it is being used, he tries to take some action to halt the procedure. Hochhuth created the character of Father Riccardo Fontana, a young Italian Jesuit who also learns of the slaughter. (Several actual courageous clergymen were bases for the role.) Through family connections, Father Riccardo is close to the Vatican, and he appeals personally to the pope to protect the Jews. He is given the now-familiar answers (among them that interference might increase cruelties to Jews and might instigate cruelties to Catholics). Ultimately, Father Riccardo pins a yellow star on his cassock and climbs into a freight car full of Jews that is headed for a death camp.

The screen version expands the Gerstein story, making it wander, and it brings in Father Riccardo too late. Much of the film is taken up with Gerstein's personal relations, his family and friends, and with predictable Nazi-officer scenes, including the German captain who knows the war will be lost but insists on playing out his role. Father Riccardo, too, is put through scenes that add little to the drama. His last moment, when he chooses not to be rescued, was not as strong in the play as it might have been, but here it falls absolutely flat.

Further reasons for the film's remoteness are that Mathieu Kassovitz is feeble as the priest and Ulrich Tukur is flavorless as Gerstein. Unhelpful, too, is Costa-Gavras's facile direction. He leans on patterns: frequently he inserts shots of freight trains on the horizon going toward the camps or going the other way empty, which reduce grimness to a cinematic device. He italicizes heavily: at a luncheon party on a sunlit Roman terrace, diplomats and three prelates suck lobster bits while Holocaust topics are shunted aside. Costa-Gavras continually uses close shots of two people, thus converting his film into the talking-heads mode of television. And he has commissioned a score by Armand Amar that pathetically tries to supply the drama that is missing on the screen. The subtlest directing touch is that Costa-Gavras never shows the interiors of gas chambers: he lets observers' reactions do that miserable work. But the picture as a whole lacks the energy and incisiveness—the sheer anger—that have marked Costa-Gavras's best films. A pity, because it is a true Costa-Gavras subject.

Taking Sides

22 September 2003

Much of history could use rearrangement. How often we wish that we could slip a hand into the record and adjust the past to improve upon what happened. This is

also true of—besides political cataclysms—theater and film history. I felt it strongly in 1995 when I saw the London production of Ronald Harwood’s play *Taking Sides*. If only chronology could be revised so that Balzac or Flaubert or Shaw could have been on hand to deal with this material. This is not to beat Harwood on the head with big names: it is merely to note that he had come up with a subject that was too large for his talent.

That subject was the case of Wilhelm Furtwängler in the de-Nazification trials of postwar Germany. This great conductor continued his career with the Berlin Philharmonic through most of the Hitler years, though he never actually joined the Nazi Party and never gave—or at least was never photographed giving—the Nazi salute. He also reportedly helped many Jewish musicians to escape. Harwood’s play focuses on a pre-trial examination of Furtwängler by an American Army major. That major is a crass philistine who has never heard of the conductor, refers to him as a bandleader, and addresses him with all the finesse of a television detective.

Much of the play deals with the major’s efforts to wring some sort of Nazi confession from Furtwängler or to discover evidence of his Nazi sympathies. More complex matters are skimmed over. Can art and politics be separated? (Furtwängler asserts that they can, but his life was proof that at most this can only seemingly be true.) Was he right not to exile himself in the 1930s because he was German and wanted to share his country’s fate? (Marlene Dietrich, among others, was castigated in postwar Germany for having remained outside.) Was he justified in putting his duty to his orchestra, to the maintenance of German culture, above the political context of the time? (Toscanini, certainly Furtwängler’s equal, absented himself from Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s realm.) All these matters, which need delicate exploration and roweling self-examination, were bundled up by Harwood into a cartoon of the major, a conventional portrait of an artist, and a shallow inquiry into the recesses of thought and character.

The film is better, not because Harwood’s screen adaptation of his play is deeper but because some of the physical data help to make the ambience more authentic. The film was directed by István Szabó, the Hungarian who made *Mephisto* and *Colonel Redl* and *Sunshine*. Especially in the last, the chronicle of a Hungarian Jewish family through decades in turbulent Budapest, Szabó used the very buildings of the city to enrich the drama. In *Taking Sides*, he does the same sort of thing as far as possible, and also throws in—a touch too often—shots of the camps.

In point of fact Furtwängler was eventually cleared: Yehudi Menuhin was one of his advocates. Still, ideationally thin though the play and the screenplay are, two elements need comment. First is the impression that World War II was fought exclusively to rescue the Jews. Murderous anti-Semitism was halted, but the war had other purposes as well. Second is the implied bravery of the Allied inquirer into German behavior. The major keeps saying or suggesting that Furtwängler should have openly resisted the Nazis. What would the major have done, assuming that he was “Aryan” and would have had a choice? Resistance to Hitler was virtually equivalent to suicide. Certainly there were people who resisted, but is the major sure that he would have been one of them? Ex post facto heroism is a bit easier.

During the London production I kept wishing that Max von Sydow had played Furtwängler instead of an earnest but struggling English actor. During Szabó’s film I wished the same thing. (If von Sydow is now too old, then that’s another ground for wanting to alter chronology.) The film’s Furtwängler is the Swedish actor Stellan Skarsgård, who is an improvement over the London one, but still he cannot suggest

the long shadowy corridors of torment and courage that would have echoed in von Sydow's performance. (Remember him as Knut Hamsun.)

Szabó used too gentle a hand with Harvey Keitel as the major. Keitel is of course not responsible for the heavy-handed writing of the role, but not one word he speaks, not one movement he makes, is other than stale caricature. We can almost hear the way he will speak a line before he speaks it. The triteness of the role and its performance, instead of dramatizing the contrast between this philistine and the artist, makes the confrontation between the two men a smug setup. Surely there must have been some boors amid the U.S. investigative corps, but to draw the major as one of them is to shrink the subject.

In the only other prominent role, the major's secretary, a small, well-encompassed performance comes from the young Austrian actress Birgit Minichmayr. The secretary's father was a general who was executed under the Nazis, yet her repressed qualms at the major's behavior are nicely sketched by Minichmayr.

In This World

13-20 October 2003

Where in the world do ideas come from? The compass of that question certainly applies to the relatively young English director Michael Winterbottom. Look at five of his recent feature films: two of them from Thomas Hardy, one about modern Manchester young people, one about London family life, and one—the best of his that I have seen—about a British television reporter in the Balkan war. After this mix comes *In This World*, which is about two young Afghans trying to go from Pakistan to England. Its title hints at the scope of Winterbottom's range; its subject has some relation to his picture about the Balkans, which dealt with orphaned children; but connections aren't needed. One of Winterbottom's qualities is that he is globally unpredictable.

In This World is a picture—one can't decently say “the kind of picture”—that could be found at a Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, except that there it would probably have been made by a compatriot of its characters. Enayat, about twenty, lives in an Afghan refugee camp in northern Pakistan and wants to leave. (The camp was founded to harbor refugees from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1970s, and its population has swelled lately with refugees from the American bombing of that country.) Enayat has a cousin of about sixteen, Jamal, who wants to go with him: Jamal's smattering of English is one reason that Enayat agrees. A wad of money—source unexplained—is given to a fixer who promises to hold it unspent until the two refugees report by telephone that they have reached London.

The voice-over states that about one million people per year are smuggled from some countries to other countries. This film follows two of that million. They travel by land instead of air, although the land route is more dangerous, presumably because land travel is cheaper and borders are more porous along this route. Trucks of various sizes are the chief means of transportation, some of them merely uncomfortable, others dangerous. Stops along the way are usually brief, protracted only when more fixing is to be done. At one stop the pair have to work in some sort of foundry to raise funds to go onward. The dangers of the trip are constant, as are its humiliations.

In This World is fiction, but none of the actors is a professional. The term that can describe it is neorealist, the style that flourished in Italy after World War II.

(*Shoeshine* and *The Bicycle Thief* and *Lamerica* and *La Terra Trema*, for instance.) Some Italian directors used non-actors to help establish the real Italy that underlay the erstwhile fascist trappings. Winterbottom's motive for the style is apparently that he wants the film's harsh verity to discomfit his audience: he wants to prod the viewer who might just say "Tsk, tsk" and then go out to dinner. To further the picture's verity, he has shot with a video camera—in Marcel Zyskind's hands—luxuriating in anti-luxury. Only natural light is used; editing and movement within shots are often swift, even slightly jarred; smooth flow is disregarded. As might well be the case if the film were truly documentary, brief transitional passages are sometimes missing. This device, and a device is what it is, is not disconcerting: it helps to support the faux verism. (The only element that doesn't fit is Dario Marianelli's music, which is intrusively lush—quite the opposite of the visual texture.)

Winterbottom's film succeeds in every way but the most important one. The danger, the grind, the smiling venality of the fixers along the way, the primal drive to find a place to live that gives one a chance to grow—all are evoked by Winterbottom's non-actors with his clear empathy. The film's ultimate flaw is in its futility. It cannot really prod us to any effect. What can we do about such situations? Many, many documentaries and fictional films expose injustices or inequities that can be addressed. But in the face of the immense facts of the smuggling problem, *In This World* leaves us with little more than "Tsk, tsk."

Mystic River

3 November 2003

Clint Eastwood's latest film, *Mystic River*, which he directed but does not appear in, has been greeted with rhapsodies that dim the dithyrambs about his *Unforgiven*. I dissented about the earlier film, and I dissent in some measure about the new one, but *Mystic River* has a unique distinction. It is the first picture I know whose path seems to have been cleared by a disparate television series.

The screenplay, derived by Brian Koppelman from a Dennis Lehane novel, is like the first half of a *Law & Order* script expanded to two hours. In that first half, as millions know, two detectives unravel a crime until suspects can be arrested. The chief difference between this show and countless other crime shows is that its revelations are not common mystery stuff: they deal with unfamiliar motives, strange relationships, oppressive legacies. The secret of the series' success, I'd say, is its intelligent pursuit of bizarreness.

No devotee of that television show is going to be disappointed by *Mystic River*. At the start, three boys of about eleven are playing street hockey in an outlying part of Boston, a district lined with frame houses. Accidentally the hockey ball rolls into a sewer. In search of further fun, the boys then scratch their names on a patch of new cement: Jimmy, Sean, and—almost—Dave. Before Dave can finish, a car pulls up. An ostensible detective summons him and puts him in the car. (We sense at once that the cement will be seen through the years with the unfinished third name hardened.) There is another man in the car, and they take Dave off to a lonely house where they abuse him sexually until, after four days, he escapes. (The second abuser wears a ring with a cross on it and has a cross around his neck. A reference to recent Massachusetts scandals?)

Some thirty years are then smoothly elided. Jimmy, who now runs a convenience store in the old neighborhood, is an ex-con. Sean is now a detective. (A

faint echo of the contrast between two other boyhood pals seen later, James Cagney and Pat O'Brien in *Angels with Dirty Faces*.) Dave, who is married and has a small son, is "marginally employed." Sean has not been close to the other two through the years, but a crime re-unites them all. That crime is the murder of Jimmy's nineteen-year-old daughter Katie. Assigned to the case are Sean and his partner. Investigating this crime means that the detectives explore the past and the resulting present.

Gripping enough, as a yarn. Admittedly my dissent has as much to do with the film's reception as with the film itself. The term "tragedy" has been liberally applied to this picture, sometimes with journalistic glibness but sometimes with classic intent. This strikes me as an aggrandizement. There is no hubris in the film, no tragic flaw of character, none of the enlightenment or scope of true tragedy. The whole piece moves forward, not to tragedy but to pathos: the belated effect of a childhood injury and an angry vulnerability to misinformation. Put aside the swollen terms and, again, *Mystic River* is little more than the distended first half of a twisty, dark *Law & Order* script. It even finishes, as usual in the series, with a malefactor who ought to come to trial in the (missing) second half.

No question, however, that Eastwood made the picture with an agreeably sure, experienced hand. He wrote the score, which has the courage to begin with a few piano doodlings before it waxes orchestral. His directing is clean, unobtrusive, empathic. One of his key achievements is his distillation of the neighborhood, a back-porch, lower-middle-class community. Two less adroit touches jar the directing. Eastwood intercuts the police discovery of Katie's murder with the First Communion of her younger sister, a flat-footed irony. The patriotic parade at the end is used, like the glimpse of the flag in *Unforgiven*, as a dry comment, but here it is blatant.

Most of the cast weave the film's fabric with truth. Tim Robbins, often admired for his light touch, plays the comparatively slow-witted Dave with respectful affection. Kevin Bacon, as Sean, shows again his mastery of minimalist realism. He never does too much or too little, and he always suggests more than we see or hear. (The screenplay gives him marital troubles, an arrantly superfluous attempt to deepen his character.) Laurence Fishburne plays Sean's partner without trying to score points: he just presents the man. In *Unforgiven* Eastwood drew an unusually vital performance from a young actor named Jaimz Woolvett. Here he gets a vital performance from the young Thomas Guiry, who plays the dead girl's boyfriend. The two prominent women in the picture, Laura Linney and Marcia Gay Harden, are outstandingly gifted. Linney keeps her last speech in mind throughout her role, a speech in which she virtually wreathes herself like a serpent around Jimmy when he feels shattered. Harden disdains triteness as she plays a woman who cries a lot.

But, for me, there is a burr in the acting fabric—the man who has been most ecstatically praised. As Jimmy, Sean Penn has the widest-ranging role, from manic anger to stoic grief, so he gets the greatest chance to impress. But once again, as in all his films, Penn comes on as an actor. Whatever the character's clothes, setting, vocation, Penn is always an actor. It isn't hamminess, it's more subtle—the feeling that he is there to wring our withers and all we have to do is wait. He is closest to verity in his quieter moments, when he lets his striking aquiline face work for him. But when he heats up, in fury or in grief, I always feel that he has flicked on a switch. Imagine a younger Robert De Niro as Jimmy, and you can feel the surge from within that would spill forth at the outburst. Not with Penn. He delivers the necessary emotion with a kind of pride in his accomplishment. Another way to put it is that Penn's outbursts seem a nightclub comic's mimicking of Penn's outbursts.

Through Eastwood's long career he has been focused, most of the time, on growth. He began with a variety of beginnings. (I once saw him do a dance act in an Italian film.) Now—and quite unfairly when we remember *The Bridges of Madison County*—he has become the Shiva of American film, the god of violence. That very fact helps to explain the ovations for *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River*. The ecstasies suggest that there is an eagerness for this man's coronation, for screen apotheoses of his chief screen activity. Thus we are allowed to think that the *Dirty Harry* and Western pistolings are exalted, sublimated, by these bronzings of violence.

Elephant

17 November 2003

Modernism, ever since it began, has evoked a kind of chic in some critics and, through them, some of the public; and postmodernism has only increased it. Let the artist do anything unconventional in his art, then present it forcefully, and there will probably be at least a few critics who will not want to seem stuffy and will praise it. Some of the public will follow. This itch to be in on the new, to be au courant, I call the Hanslick syndrome. In nineteenth-century Vienna, there was an eminent music critic named Eduard Hanslick who had one blind spot: the new music of Wagner. (Wagner caricatured him as Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*.) His adverse view of Wagner engulfed Hanslick in history; now his good work is largely forgotten, and he is remembered only as a critic who was deaf to Wagner. Ever since Hanslick, it seems, there have been critics so worried about sharing his fate that they praise almost anything new and different—if the artist presents it with sufficient disdain for those who do not appreciate it.

Here in the film world is Gus Van Sant, attracting anti-Hanslicks of our day. Van Sant eases matters for them by varying his avant output with accessible work—*Good Will Hunting* and *Finding Forrester*, for instance—but those films seem to be only the means to finance his real interests, such pictures as *My Own Private Idaho* and *Gerry*, large vessels brimful of nothing. Now comes *Elephant*, lauded at Cannes and celebrated here.

The title has nothing to do directly with the film. Van Sant, it seems, picked it up from a French short where it signified a looming intrusion in an unlikely place. The place here is an ultra-modern American high school in a quiet town, and the intrusion is a variant of the Columbine horror—the frolicsome killing by two high school students of fellow students and teachers.

In Michael Moore's recent documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, the slaughter was treated in a possessive and slightly smug way, but at least there was some attempt at understanding. Van Sant, very consciously a superior being who need not bother with such kitsch as understanding and motive, spends the first two-thirds of his film with a number of students who are just going about their business. Not all of them even have the special pathos of becoming victims. The film opens with John, one of the students, taking over the wheel of the family car because his father is apparently hopped up. This, we may think, is the beginning of a story, but Van Sant is above such trivia. The father virtually disappears from the film; John goes to school, and on his way out passes two students headed in, dressed in combat fatigues and carrying weapon bags. John asks them what's going on, and they tell him to get lost. He leaves. Most of the rest of the picture is a flashback—what happens in the school on that day before the massacre.

What happens is nothing. We spend large chunks of time following individual students or small groups of them as they move down the halls, go to lunch, to the rest rooms, to class. Van Sant follows them with long tracking shots as if he were providing insight for the slaughter that we know is coming. But in these long traipsings there is not one iota of high school life that all of us did not know beforehand, not one investment of emotion, just some sixty minutes of blandness into which the massacre will erupt. Van Sant could have begun his film with the slaughter itself, but then we would not have had the chance to admire his courage in doing nothing for the first hour of his picture. (Think of the painters who have given us square yards of sheer black so that they could put a thin ribbon of color at the side.)

We then see the two killers preparing for their exploit, including a joint shower in which they kiss. They discuss their plans and proceed. The leader's last words to his pal are "Have fun." At the end, the survivor just stands there calmly. (Despite all the murders, the police haven't yet appeared.) As far as we have seen, the murderers are run-of-the-mill boys: no explanation is hinted at. Why these two and not any of the others that we see? Is Van Sant telling us that it could have been any of the students? If so, his cool generalization makes the film even more irresponsible.

Summoning generosity, we can perhaps view *Elephant* as an attempt to take a horror out of its emotional context and hold it up in a dried, shriveled way, like one of those shrunken heads that some savages preserve and that have small relation to the act of decapitation. But to venture even this much rationale is to lean toward the Hanslick syndrome. Van Sant's film is a braggart piece of empty exhibitionism.

The Dreamers

1 March 2004

The news of a new Bernardo Bertolucci film gave me a double pang. The first was nostalgia for the high postwar days of Italian film. Bertolucci is much younger than the vanguard of that postwar group—he was born in 1940, Antonioni in 1912; but he was so active in the later days of the period, and his first notable film, *Before the Revolution*, was so patently influenced by Antonioni that he almost seems the group's protégé. The second pang was fear—about the subject. For a long time Bertolucci seems to have been ravenous for subjects, sometimes grabbing at matters quite far from his temperament (*The Last Emperor*, *Little Buddha*), sometimes wallowing in poor material because it was close to his temperament (*La Luna*, *Besieged*, *Stealing Beauty*). Well, at least *The Dreamers* is in the latter group, close to what we might think of as Bertolucci's realm, but it is fraught with new poignancies.

The screenplay is by the English film critic Gilbert Adair, who adapted it from one of his novels. Its title is too oblique: it might better have been called *The Fantasists*. The place is Paris in 1968. A twenty-year-old American named Matthew is there, supposedly studying French. We learn from his voice-over comments (bits of letters to his mother) that he has started going to the Cinémathèque and has become intoxicated with film, especially the American films that are often shown there. It is the year when Henri Langlois, the co-founder of the Cinémathèque and now its head, is slated for discharge by the government, which subsidizes the place. This act provokes fierce student riots that persist until Langlois is reinstated. During the riots Matthew meets two French students, Theo and Isabelle, twins of about his own age who speak English. They take him home to meet their English mother and their poet father. (Incidentally, Bertolucci's father was a poet.) Papa is mild about Matthew until

the youth absentmindedly works out a sort of Paul Auster pattern on the tablecloth with a cigarette lighter. Papa is now impressed with the youth. As the parents are off to the country, Papa suggests that Matthew be invited to stay with Isabelle and Théo in this palatial Art Nouveau apartment.

Thus these three young people are ensconced in luxury, well equipped with food and wine and gonads. Outside the apartment the student riots are still boiling. Inside, the three go through various stages of friendship, intimacy, disputation, reconciliation, conveyed in gnomic dialogue. The three are linked by, among other things, their passion for film. They quarrel about Chaplin and Keaton, they imitate a death in *Scarface*, they mimic Garbo in *Queen Christina*, and much more, abetted by appropriate film clips that Bertolucci slips in. (The one grating insert in this movie-buff mélange is the death of Mouchette in Bresson's crystalline film.) All through the long stay in the apartment the relatively innocent Matthew is fascinated with this plunge into, as he thinks, continental depths, and the twins tease him, step by step, with their sexual freedom.

The twins are quasi-incestuous; they are often nude together, though apparently they never actually have sex. Matthew, too, is soon nude with them: full frontal nudity is the order of the day—and night. Amidst the numerous incidents, the three of them loll together in a foamy bathtub, which I suppose indicates that at heart they are still children. But they are not often innocent babes. One critic said that he found *The Dreamers* “disarmingly sweet and completely enchanting.” The sweetness and enchantment must then include the scene in which Theo masturbates on a photo of Marlene Dietrich because Isabelle commanded him to do so, while she and Matthew watch. Then she scrapes Theo's semen off the wall and sniffs it. Sweet and enchanting, too, must have been the kitchen scene where Theo is frying eggs while Isabelle and Matthew are screwing on the floor behind him.

What is eventually dispiriting about these scenes, about the whole film, is that it all proceeds to no purpose. Possibly these sex episodes are meant to deride taboos and are performed by people somehow liberated by a passion for film, but, because these scenes are so overweeningly sophisticated, are in a smug way mere showing off, they soon degenerate into the escapades of naughty children who happen to be old enough to screw. These episodes just go on and on until a rioter's stone breaks a window. This presumably reminds them of their cinephile duty: the trio move into the streets and re-join the rioters. Politics and sex have often been conjoined in Bertolucci but never to so little point.

Two of the young actors are adequate. Louis Garrel as Theo carries on competently in the Jean-Claude Brialy tradition—the young French intellectual who seems to be sitting at a cafe table even when he is walking around. Eve Green is lovely and generally sincere. But Michael Pitt as Matthew, trying hard, never cracks the cellophane in which he seems to have been shipped to France.

Bertolucci's directing has its usual sweep, its deft and startling use of close-ups, and the editing that, though logical, always seems a bit impatient. (The cinematography by Fabio Cianchetti is suitably lush.) But the overall effect of the film is melancholy: it seems desperate for the past. First, there are the several reminders of *Last Tango in Paris*. They begin with the glimpses of Jean-Pierre Léaud, who was the young filmmaker in the earlier film, and who is involved in the riots here. (He is shot from a distance so that he can look as he looked in 1972.) Second, there is the very setting: once again Bertolucci wanted to stage his sexual circus in Paris. (And in Paris he could also have student riots about film.) Third, there is the use of the apartment as discrete sexual arena. In *Last Tango* it was an unfurnished place,

this one is lavish. It is almost as if Bertolucci had thought, “Let’s vary it this time. And, for further variation, this time let’s have three people instead of two. And no Brando equivalent. This time everyone is young.”

Sadly, this helps to make it an old man’s picture. Bertolucci is now only sixty-three, after which age many a director has done good work, but in this film he strives so strenuously for the past that he seems to be facing backward. The very blatancy of the sex, its calculated lazy bravado, make us suspect that Bertolucci dyes his hair and worries about his chin line. In *Last Tango* the sex was only moderately explicit, but that apartment reeked of erotic musk: in this film the sex is much more explicit, but the effect is much more voyeuristic than engulfing.

Saddest of all is his ache for 1968, for the cinephilia embedded in it, for the Bertolucci and the world that existed then. He longs for the time when students would riot because the Cinémathèque director-founder was assailed. He longs for the time when young people interwove cinematic passion with almost everything they thought and did—including, he posits somewhat enviously, torrential sex.

In 1966 I published an essay called “The Film Generation,” which was about the American counterparts of those French students. Twenty years later I published an essay called “After the Film Generation,” an obituary. It wouldn’t have done any good to send Bertolucci a copy of the second piece. He knew everything in it and also knew that, when the chance came, he intended to disregard it. He wanted one more tango in Paris.

Dogville

26 April 2004

Whatever else he may lack, Lars von Trier has mastery of at least one thing: self-promotion. In 1995 this Danish director, then thirty-nine and little known, stood up at a Paris film conference and pronounced that for the past ten years film had been rubbish. He then threw pamphlets into the audience. The pamphlets heralded a new film mode—an ethics, really—that von Trier and some other Danes had forged. It was called *Dogma 95*, and it abjured technical adornments, declaring that all shooting must be done in natural light, all sound recording must be direct, and so on, in simplification. These moves would presumably rid the film world of rubbish. The fact that this self-styled “Vow of Chastity” condemned many of the best films in the world’s treasury, that some of the most talented filmmakers would be hobbled by this creed, registered not at all. Bravura carried the day. Von Trier’s public show achieved what to some of us seemed its prime purpose: to put him (and, to a lesser extent, his colleagues) on the map.

The film of his that came along the next year (not the first he had made) was in English: *Breaking the Waves*, a love story so breathlessly overheated and unconventional that it brushed the ridiculous—and also tampered with the *Dogma* code. Nonetheless, the mantle of genius, in some measure self-bestowed, rested on von Trier. His next film, also in English, *Dancer in the Dark*, was set in the Pacific Northwest (though he had never been to America) and gave us the singer Björk and the actress Catherine Deneuve as factory workers who got involved in a tricky plot. (Adieu, *Dogma*.) Still, von Trier, buoyed by heat and exaggeration, his eccentricities confirming for some his genius, continued to bask in the renown he had acquired in 1995.

Now he has reached a pinnacle. His new film, *Dogville*, again in English, is a very dubious work (the doubts follow), but it has provoked stormy discussion. How happy von Trier must be. Perhaps more people will read about the picture than will see it, but he can relish his currency as a hot film topic. Possibly he doesn't care greatly what people think of him as long as they talk about him. (Will they connect the picture's title with *Dogma*?) For my part, I concede a bit grudgingly that he has to be discussed.

The prime issue of the controversy is the charge that *Dogville* is anti-American. I wish it were. Quickly I add that I also wish it were at least cogent and angry instead of flapping around in a series of wormy episodes. In these episodes people who are only incidentally American are revealed as less nice than they seemed at first. Is this an American monopoly? Insofar as one can find any specifically anti-American sting in the picture, it is at the level of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and is just about as fresh. Many a night David Letterman says something that cuts deeper into American defects. (Note: von Trier still hasn't been to America.)

The one genuinely interesting element of the film has been least discussed: its scenic style. Von Trier, the fervent cinephile, has used the theater, openly theatrical, to give his film individuality. At the start we look down on a large floor plan spread on a wide studio floor, with white lines on a dark background marking the location of houses and streets in this town called Dogville. It is in the Rocky Mountains, and the time is the Depression, says the omnipresent narrator. As the camera descends, people begin to appear in those blueprint streets and rooms, along with bits of furniture. The film proceeds at floor level in this minimalist fashion so that everything has the air of a theater rehearsal on a marked-out stage before the sets arrive. Add that the lighting is completely theatrical—not cinematically fixed for any one scene, but constantly changing, swelling, diminishing, as it often does in the theater. At best this theatricalization helps the episodes to trudge along after one another without transitional material. But it is only a sterile conceit: it doesn't help to evoke or to create a theme.

The artsy mumbo-jumbo begins before the film itself as a credit tells us that the picture is in a prologue and nine chapters. Each chapter then has a quasi-Brechtian announcement of intent. To Dogville comes a harried young woman named Grace, who is fleeing gangsters. She is befriended by a would-be writer in the town named Thomas Edison, Jr. (His father is a doctor, not the inventor.) He persuades the town—about fifteen people in all—to take Grace in and shelter her. Grace's residence in the town leads her to a range of experiences: helping in a shop, helping to teach, helping to pick apples, and more. She and Tom begin an affair, less out of passion than proximity, and in the course of events she is raped a couple of times by other men, and in time becomes a sexual utility for almost all the town's males. This has very little visible effect on Grace, who, between beddings, is the person she has always been—mildly puzzled, basically placid.

What all these adventures are meant to dramatize—about her, about the townsfolk, about America—is difficult to discern. The finish brings a surprise that is utterly irrelevant to what has taken us three hours to watch. If we have suspected, even hoped, that the film is some sort of religious allegory—a refugee from the world finds a heavenly haven that turns out to be hellish—it is demolished by the ending.

And the ending is not the end. Under the closing credits we see a lot of photos of Depression-era America in the middle of which Richard Nixon makes a startling appearance. The relation of the wretched people in the photos to those actorish

Dogville folk in their theater setting is nil; and, villainous though Nixon is to some of us, this reminder of his villainy is irrelevant here.

All through the film a narrator explains and links elements for us. That narration is written in prose that beggars parody: when Grace becomes sexually available to many, the voice tells us that she offers “a provision of carnality.” The narrator is John Hurt, a beautiful speaker but as British as possible. Why a Brit for this American setting? Anyway, how well does von Trier know English? That narration and the film’s often insipid dialogue suggest a distance between his writing and our language. Anthony Dod Mantle did the cinematography, which frequently is handheld and whips around in a manner that has little to do with what is happening. In fact, this thoroughly filmic method contradicts the theater setting. And that setting, done by Peter Grant, is as dated as much else, a reminder of the scenic avant-garde of the 1920s.

Some familiar actor faces float through as the townsfolk: Lauren Bacall, Patricia Clarkson, Stellan Skarsgård, Ben Gazzara. Grace and Tom are played by Nicole Kidman and Paul Bettany, two fat-free actors: they don’t do us any harm, but they don’t have much flavor. Still, full-bodied performances would be out of place in von Trier’s disembodied, patchy, pointless work, which isn’t even successfully pretentious.

Before Sunset

9 August 2004

To Richard Linklater attention must be paid. Born in Texas in 1960, he has been making films since 1988 and has established himself as sui generis through viewpoint and style. Some instances. His first feature, *Slacker*, dealt with the drifting of dropout students in his hometown of Austin and was reticently daring: the picture itself had the lackadaisical loneliness of its characters’ lives. Others of his films have this mood—young people trying to find purpose without caring strenuously about purpose. On the contrary, *The School of Rock* was a carefully shaped comedy about elementary school kids and their music, and might have succeeded as a rock extravaganza except that it relied heavily on Jack Black, an eccentric comic who can’t sustain a whole film. *Tape* did succeed, though it had only three characters in a hotel room, remembering an incident from their college days. Largely through his insistence that that these people mattered to him, Linklater took us along with him.

Now he has trumped one of his aces. In 1995 Linklater made *Before Sunrise*, about a young American man and a young Parisian woman who meet on a train to Vienna. Again with a dexterity that somehow conveyed affectionate concern for this pair, Linklater explored the romantic possibilities of their encounter. Now he has made *Before Sunset*, which is about the same pair nine years later, meeting this time in Paris.

They had parted after their Vienna adventure. The young man returned to New York, married, had a child, and wrote a novel—apparently about that Vienna night—which is a bestseller. It has brought him on a European book tour. The young woman has read the book and is at the bookshop, lingering in the background, alerting him shyly to her presence. He responds.

Linklater evidently wanted to find out the long-range effects of the first episode on these two people. It’s almost as if he were chastising himself for the romantic shape of the first film and wanted to see what happened to this pair in

relatively real life after the neat romance was tied up. This venture called for special daring and skill. Approximately seventy-eight of the picture's eighty minutes consist of talk between these two, as they walk around Paris in the brief time before he is supposed to leave. The screenplay is credited to Linklater and the two actors—once again they are Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy—but the effect is as if Linklater had provided only a thematic road map and had asked his actors to improvise as they went along. The result is a peculiar small gem, a true Linklater gem. The verity of the film, rather than any novelty or twist, keeps us fixed.

That verity is in more than the details. Hawke talks of his marriage, to a woman whom he respects but doesn't love, and of his son, whom he adores. Delpy tells of her various jobs with socially concerned groups and of her various experiences with men. The depth in the film, hardly profound but affecting because we don't expect even this much, comes from the slow realization, by us and by them, that their dissatisfactions with their lives are part of their lives. He and she would have had disappointments: if they had remained together, they would not have had perfection. Of course all lives are not equivalent, Linklater seems to say, but don't torment yourself with the thought that you have missed out on flawless paradise. Everyone must choose, usually wants to choose, and choice always means—in proportions that vary—acquisitions and losses.

Visually Linklater made sure that this anti-romance is counterpointed with romantic atmosphere. As Hawke and Delpy talk, they wander through picture-book old Paris. (We never see anything that was built after 1800.) The rich colors in Lee Daniels' camera tease at the factuality of the two lives. The film's running time is almost actual—screen time virtually equals the time these two people spend talking before the ending that we know will come about. The ending is, once again, not firmly fixed. Perhaps nine years from now there will be not a sequel, but another chapter.

Hawke is almost at ease. He has to work hard in order to seem effortless. Occasionally there is a threadbare spot in his performance when we can see the actor acting. Delpy is perfect, completely present and winning from the moment she appears. Linklater has used them both adroitly as instruments of his imagination. Once again he shows in a tacit way that he is an experimental and adventurous director, without advertisement, simply by going on about his highly personal business. One of his small but helpful perceptions: Delpy, European, still smokes; Hawke, American, doesn't (though he takes a cigarette from her).

Rosenstrasse

6 September 2004

The German director Margarethe von Trotta makes me a little sad. This may be my own fault because of unrealistic expectations; nonetheless it was von Trotta who caused them. After an acting career that was merely adequate, she became a director and, along with Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog, was prominent in the New German Cinema that surged in the 1970s. The others have faded; von Trotta at least still is present. Her second and third films deserved places, in my view, in the world's choice store. *Sisters* is in a sense a cinematic realization of the music with which it begins, the "Lament" from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, as it follows the travails of a shadowed young woman. *Marianne and Julianne* is the best film I know about the liberal dilemma: a liberal woman who has an activist sister is divided, but

also not divided, from that sister because of the latter's political violence. It is a deep and searching work.

These two early wonderful films raised hopes for one of the world's premier film careers, and von Trotta's subsequent film, *Rosa Luxemburg*, though it devolved into a series of speeches, was so marvelously made that it fed those hopes. I took it to be a secondary work by a major director. But the films of hers that I have seen since then, though certainly not barren, seemed even lesser—descents from the two splendid films that she had once made.

Von Trotta's new film, *Rosenstrasse*, is another of the same: not barren, but a poignant reminder of past wonders. From the opening moments, the clarity and the control of movement are in themselves impressive, and they never falter. The actors understand completely why they are there. The editing, complex because of several time strands, is more than skillful. But the screenplay by von Trotta and Pamela Katz suborns its subject.

The base of the story is factual. In late February and early March of 1943, five thousand Berlin Jews were rounded up by the SS, and some of them were interned in a former Jewish welfare center in the Rosenstrasse. They were destined for Auschwitz. Many of the interned Jews had non-Jewish wives—Aryan, as the tag went—and dozens of those wives soon gathered in the street outside the center to protest. One estimate says that the crowd reached a thousand. This open protest, in the heart of the Nazi capital, persisted for several days, and finally Goebbels decided to quash the problem, without the threatened gunfire, by sending some of the Jews to labor camps instead of Auschwitz and by returning some to their wives. (The future of those returnees is not part of the story.)

These facts are in the film, but they are swathed in intricate fiction. The film begins in the relatively recent present, in a New York apartment where a Jewish widow is mourning her lately deceased husband. (The widow is played by Jutta Lampe, who was in von Trotta's two best films.) The mourning is being done in strict Orthodox manner with mirrors covered, shoes off, and so on. The dead man had not been particularly religious: this orthodoxy is the widow's idea. It turns out—things keep turning out—that this Jewish widow was a child in that Rosenstrasse crowd, bereft of parents, and was taken in by an Aryan woman who raised her. The widow has a daughter who is engaged to a non-Jew, though her mother disapproves. Spurred by her mother's new orthodoxy and eager to get the truth of her mother's past—also spurred by the objections to her fiancé—the daughter goes to Berlin to seek out that now-aged Aryan protester and protector. The old lady is helpful: she tells the young woman much. Among other matters, the old lady (it turns out!) is a baroness, which helped her at the time of the protest to meet Goebbels and to use her womanliness to sway him. Von Trotta is always aware of woman's position in a male-run world. Here it is an Aryan wife who, through sacrifice to a man, alters the fate of some Jewish men. (How this relates to the modern widow's sudden piety is not clear.)

Von Trotta has spoken openly of the difficulty she had in getting this film financed and of the numerous revisions she had to make to her original screenplay. (Originally it concentrated on the Rosenstrasse events. The modern sections and the baroness were added at the producers' wishes.) I have rarely seen a film that so plainly showed its patchings and concessions. Admittedly, she has not patronized her material. Though she has made the film as if it were truly hers, it isn't. A lot of supposedly appealing decor has been draped on stark fact. Allow, if you like, that she had to change her script in order to make the film. But the viewer can see only the

film she made, not the one she might have done. *Rosenstrasse* is again only a sad reminder of the earlier von Trotta.

We Don't Live Here Anymore

13 September 2004

Marital fidelity has always had a stressful time in drama and fiction and film, but in recent decades it has come under even more stress. Obviously this is because it is under more stress in the life around us. The Beast of the Apocalypse is not about to devour true marriage and genuine love, but nowadays our society accepts more widely than it used to do that the marriage contract does not fully accommodate the facts of emotional experience. By now, if an intelligent up-to-date spouse in a film wanted to split because of the other spouse's affair, the scene might have a faint touch of mildew.

At any rate, this latter-day acceptance is the ambience of *We Don't Live Here Anymore*. The screenplay by Larry Gross, derived from two novellas by Andre Dubus, fixes on two couples, both of the men on the faculty of a small college in a small town, both of the wives intelligent and alert, all of them sensitive to sexual radiation. In the course of the story each husband sleeps with the other man's wife, the other two learn in time of this behavior, and all four accept it-with different degrees of readiness but without schism.

It is very much to the point of the film that these four are not degenerate animals. Each knows what he or she is doing and has worked out a rationale—reason glandularly tempered for his or her behavior. Though this is never mentioned, we can see that their motives have something to do with private dissatisfaction in their lives, not sexual yet with extramarital sex as a possible emollient. At different moments the camera glides from one “mixed” couple making love to the other similarly engaged—and the music is Beethoven's First, not *Così fan tutte*.

Part of their rationale, consciously or not, is that they are aware of that ambience in which they and the film reside. These four people never note the matter, but surely, informed and aware as they are, they would have seen films and plays and read novels about modern marital acceptances. Possibly, since modern self-consciousness is so enveloping, they see themselves as characters in their film. They certainly have some sense of familiar pattern. When Edith, wife of Hank, is undressing for her first encounter with Jack, husband of Terry, she says wryly to Jack, “How do you think we're going to be caught?”

The dialogue is as fresh and sharp as it ought to be. The characters, though the four are a bit more alike than they would want to believe, see their individualities with such conviction that we accept a degree of self-deception. Each in the course of the film investigates his or her resentments and deprivations and needs—and, especially for the men, some sense of failure—but fundamentally they are four people ensnared in a time when questions are more available than answers. The story concludes, of course, but its gist is in its transit, not its finish. A moment stands out. One day Jack speaks in one of his classes about Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, that mountain of pain and transcendence, and when a student asks what Ivan got from his travail, Jack replies that he found God. The phrase sounds odd in Jack's mouth. There is no sense of supervising order in his life.

The film was directed by John Curran, who made *Praise* a few years ago and who here does fine, close, and intimate “chamber” work. The cinematography by

Maryse Alberti is of the most desirable kind: it creates mood and drama without ever being ostentatious about it. But it is the acting that truly realizes the film.

Through the century or so since the film medium was invented, we can trace a basic change in acting for the screen. At first it was theater acting, which was gradually condensed but is still on hand and, when good, is still very welcome. (See anything with Meryl Streep or Christopher Plummer.) But gradually there grew in film a kind of acting conceived for the camera (Spencer Tracy, Jean Gabin), and with the arrival of television this concentration intensified. Obviously actors have always used their faces, but in the last few decades actors have come to use the camera as a confidant a collaborator, almost a part of their persons. Curran understands this matter and has shot a great deal of the film in close-up, medium and large, with actors who understand why. His film is an example of what might be called (riskily) facial acting.

The cast relies on degrees of quick expression and transition that would be difficult to project in a theater and yet are certainly not mugging. Naomi Watts, who is Edith, doesn't have an especially distinguished face, but it delicately conveys conflicting thoughts and feelings. Laura Dern, as Terry, has a more exceptional face and, though she italicizes a bit, it becomes a kind of journal of her inner life. Peter Krause, as Hank, comes from television and, wondrously enough, has a real face, not one of those plastic ones so common on the small screen. Krause has thought considerably about Hank and presents a good deal of a man who is trying to cling to hope as a novelist and poet at the same time that he doesn't want to miss sensual compensations that come along.

Most striking of all is Mark Ruffalo as Jack. Ruffalo, with a face that is the common man's apostrophized, makes Mark a man sentenced to the daffiness of even a reasonably happy life. Quite aware of his misdeeds, he has long since stopped worrying about them: he shrugs invisibly, seeing his dalliances as private rewards for the shortcomings of existence. Ruffalo's talent and his instinct for verity serve the camera well.

The Merchant of Venice

24 January 2005

Every film of Shakespeare brings persistent questions about Shakespeare on film. The arts of theater and film, cognate though they are, never seem more disparate than in such an instance. The basic breach here is between a form that is classic, whatever its romantic ventures, and a form that is realistic, no matter how romantically it too ventures. The differing organisms of theater and film are never more patent than when Shakespeare is the film subject. Both arts build on texts, but Shakespeare wrote for an audience that liked to listen and films are made for people who primarily like to watch. Put otherwise, Shakespeare lives in his language: films are—the old term is perfect—moving pictures. The two aims blend occasionally but not consistently.

In a film, moreover, Shakespeare must always be condensed. Of course the texts are almost always condensed somewhat in the theater (who today would want all the verbal haberdashery that entranced the Elizabethan audience?), but film condensations are done in order to make room for cinema, so the richness of the work as play is bruised. (Some academics hold that filmic elements improve Shakespeare. Apparently there is nothing that some academics will not write on the road to tenure and promotion.)

Much of the debate on this subject would melt if a plain fact were recognized. A film of Shakespeare is not the original in an equivalent form: it is a different creature. This is clear enough in opera. No one mistakes the Boito-Verdi *Otello*, tremendous as it is, for *Othello*. The opera is a quite separate work, grown from Shakespeare and trying through its own means to equal it. Similarly, no one ought reasonably to mistake Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, fine as it is, for the work that its author designed for the stage.

Now here is *The Merchant of Venice*, inevitably raising all the old questions—and more. This is Michael Radford's film, not Shakespeare's play. The screen adaptation is by Radford, with the text pared, discarding much of the verbal embroidery but also some of the verbal delights. This condensation has provided Radford with chances for lots of Venetian revelry in 1596—bare-breasted wenches are plentiful—and Venetian vistas. What Radford has retained of the original, he treats warmly and intelligently, and with a few welcome surprises in the acting. But he has produced a different work, moderately successful in itself, out of materials provided by Shakespeare.

Chief among the pleasing surprises is Al Pacino's Shylock. With Pacino's past in mind, we might have expected that he would make the sulphurous most of the role's raging moments. (I remember George C. Scott in the my-ducats-and-my-daughter speech: I thought he had literally gone crazy.) Pacino, presumably with Radford's guidance, in the main does otherwise. Excellently made up and costumed, he takes the part inward and makes it tight, bitten, soul-scarred—a man rather than a collection of scenes. Lynn Collins is an admirable Portia, womanly yet commanding. Joseph Fiennes is skillful enough as Bassanio, though he doesn't have the charm that would make Portia long for his return. A particular prize is Jeremy Irons' Antonio. With his first moment, the play's first line—"In sooth, I know not why I am so sad"—he is immersed in middle-aged, virtually inexplicable melancholy. Graceful touches abound: for instance, when Shylock is preparing the bond for Antonio's signature and can't think of a forfeit, or pretends it, and finally proposes the pound of flesh, a small surprised smile crosses Antonio's face at the absurdity of the idea.

Radford pays sufficient attention to the much-bruited view of the Antonio-Bassanio friendship as homoerotic. To establish one aspect of Bassanio, we first see him frivolling with some women, but then we also see him and Antonio kiss goodbye when they part to look for money. That money is to finance Bassanio's pursuit of a wealthy wife in Belmont. The question as to why Antonio risks his life to finance his close friend's departure is answered at the very end with a hint that Bassanio's marriage may not exclude Antonio's love.

But one prominent component of the play simply wobbles in the film. As many have noted, *The Merchant* sets the harrowing story of Shylock against the romantic comedy of Bassanio and Portia. In the theater the contrast can be affecting. On screen those comedic elements simply look phony. The camera, cruelly veristic, turns them into *papier-mâché*. First, the device of the three caskets by which Portia chooses a husband, a device in which Freud found symbolic depths, seems dully mechanical when thrust at us by the camera. Second, Bassanio's failure to recognize his newly-wed wife in the courtroom just because she has put on a lawyer's gown (and here a fake moustache) is a theater convention that works with theater distances but not in film close-ups. Then there is the ring that Bassanio has promised Portia to wear forever and which he has given to the lawyer. (This ring plot also includes a parallel with a friend of his.) With this last-minute ring mix-up, Shakespeare was clearly trying to restore the key of romantic comedy to his play after the grim trial

scene. It can sometimes work on stage. Here, put in our laps (so to speak), it just makes us wish for the film to end.

A much more grave problem accompanies this play, unique in the whole Shakespeare canon. Harold Bloom, eminent Shakespearean, puts it strongly: "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work." It took two hundred years before Shylock was played as anything other than a stock Jewish buffoon-villain. Subsequently, great actors such as Kean and Booth and Irving portrayed him as a tragic figure—and tailored the play to fit this view. Critics, too, have tried to make this case, attempting to exculpate the author. But no amount of wishful thinking can shift this play from the social attitudes of the author's day into Shylock's tragedy. The best that can be said here in defense of the greatest writer who ever lived is that he gave his Jew a character and a rationale.

In our time, specifically the post-Holocaust time, the play has entered a changed atmosphere. John Gross, in his magisterial study *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, states the matter calmly and well: "[*The Merchant of Venice*] can never seem quite the same again. It is still a masterpiece; but there is a permanent chill in the air, even in the gardens of Belmont." Radford's film, lithe and lively though it often is, cannot quite escape that chill.

Junebug

12 September 2005

The first few minutes of *Junebug* are misleading. It creaks as it sets some of its characters in place. Then suddenly, almost as if a different director and cast had stepped in, the texture becomes smooth, the intent very engaging. This is the sort of film we say (or used to say) we don't often get in America, the film whose interest is not in suspense and climax but in character verity. All that *Junebug* is about is its people. And what is eventually more ingratiating, most of them are quite ordinary. The screenwriter Angus MacLachlan and the director Phil Morrison and an astonishingly perfect cast have quietly made a daring picture. Its prime purpose, without gush, is to set the seal on human commonality.

Madeleine is a smart and likeable young art dealer in Chicago, lately married to George, who comes from a small town in North Carolina. Madeleine becomes interested in an eccentric elderly painter down in Carolina, who lives near George's hometown. She goes down to see the painter, George comes with her, and, since they are in the vicinity, they stay for some days with George's family. Two separate contrasts in temperament are set up: Madeleine and the slightly nutty but shrewd painter; Madeleine and George's family, who can be ticked off as homespun country folk, which is true but wonderfully insufficient.

George's father, Eugene, taciturn and erect, is at the point in life where he is willing to accept whatever ripples past him. Peg, his long-haired wife, is the sort who says she doesn't want anyone messing around in her kitchen but who, beneath the magazine mantras, is able to see, to hope, to be wounded. Their other son, Johnny, a high school dropout, taciturnly hates a lot, including his more polished brother, George. Johnny has let this discontent leak over to his wife, the very pregnant Ashley, who is blandly garrulous until she is movingly garrulous. The marvel of this picture is that the writer and director could hardly have picked a family of less immediate

interest; yet, because they understand that simplicity, too, is complex, they draw us in and in.

The differences between city folk and country folk are immanent still. (George manages to belong to both species.) At the start this seems to be the theme. But the caloric humanity of Madeleine soon burns away the distance between her and George's family—most slowly with Johnny. We begin to share the silent pleasure that most of them have in their daily doings. There are two major events, Madeleine's conclusion with the painter and Ashley's childbearing, but they don't seem climactic in the conventional sense. They are just especially weighty events happening in some lives.

Reminders inevitably float up with this film. I thought of a forgotten Czech gem, *Intimate Lighting* by Ivan Passer, in which a city couple go back to visit friends in a small town. Again, nothing and a great deal happen. And the church supper scene here, the bridal shower scene, other glimpses of all the people roundabout who are simultaneously near-satire yet utterly genuine, reminded me of similar folk in Bruce Beresford's Texas poem, *Tender Mercies*.

Embeth Davidtz as Madeleine, Alessandro Nivola as George, Scott Wilson as Eugene, Celia Weston as Peg, Amy Adams as Ashley, Benjamin McKenzie as Johnny, Frank Hoyt Taylor as the painter—all of them are names that would be shameful to omit. All of them, I believe, would want to join in praise of Phil Morrison, young and not greatly experienced, who combines directorial skills with overriding faith in the rightness of what he is doing. He is fond of interpolating shots of fields and trees as brief interludes, which sometimes are more punctuation than ambience, but Morrison's achievement here earns him the heavy burden of hope for his future.

Nine Lives

7 November 2005

What a welcome surprise. *Nine Lives* is a title that arouses suspicion: we feel that somebody thought it was nifty and then had to cook up a script to go with it. Wrong. Rewardingly wrong. This film, written and directed by Rodrigo García, is composed of nine vignettes that are percipient and moving, in a general key of truth, and are presented in this multiple form because it is this artist's way to completion. García wanted to paint a canvas of nine elements, rather than one large element; and, though only a few of the vignettes are related, the film leaves us with a sense of wholeness, not of stunt. García could not hope to cover much of contemporary life, but with sharp, well-articulated incidents, he has fashioned a small conspectus of some of the losses, the peaks, and the oddly sustaining dailiness of modern life.

His view of his material suggests Raymond Carver. The characters in these sketches are borne to extremities, not by huge cataclysms of dramatic action but by the conjunction of matters in everyday life. Each sketch is titled with a woman's name. In the first one, Sandra (Elpidia Carrillo), a prisoner in a Los Angeles jail, has a meeting scheduled with her young daughter who is on the other side of a glass panel with a telephone connection. But the phone doesn't work; and Sandra's rage and disappointment at the loss of what her drab day was leading to is enough to define her life and possibilities. In the next vignette, Diana (the gifted Robin Wright Penn), married and pregnant, is wheeling her shopping cart through a supermarket when she meets a lover whom she hasn't seen in years, who is in the neighborhood only briefly,

and who was very much more than an incident in her life. Penn, in a sort of gavotte in the aisles as she moves away from him and back, conveys that, though she is well married and eager for her child, a whole vibrant segment of her life has suddenly glowed for her. Regret, reconciliation, and acceptance of the very shape of being are all in her lovely performance.

Of the other seven sketches, empathic and keen-eyed all, I note only two. In a hospital room Camille (Kathy Baker) is being prepared for mastectomy. Her husband (Joe Mantegna) is with her. There is no drama, no action of any kind other than the preparations. The scene is filled with the atmosphere of a long and reasonably pleasant marriage that she fears will now be marred. He attempts to re-assure her. No sentiment, not a soft word—at least not on her part; but the scene is crammed with fear, less of death than of loss. Not physical loss.

The last vignette takes place in a cemetery. Maggie (Glenn Close) has a small daughter, and they walk past gravestones to a particular plot where they spread a cloth and have a picnic. We never learn who the deceased is, though it seems fair to assume that it is the husband-father. Evidently Maggie and her child have done this before because they never refer to what they are doing, they just do it. When the talk begins to slip slightly into mush, García saves it. The little girl has to pee, and Maggie sends her behind a tree after handing her a Kleenex. This touch of the mundane is exactly what was needed to keep the scene from being a “scene.”

García, who is the son of Gabriel García Márquez, is much experienced in film and television. It is really cheering to see how well he works with actors, how, like a good conductor, he has brought his players to perfect pitch. Something else is clear. He is confident enough as a director to break rules when he needs to. We are told that the film was shot in nine ten- to twelve-minute Steadicam shots. I thought I saw a touch or two of editing, and an editor is given credit. Still, the shooting of the film has a flow that ignores convention. When Diana and her ex-lover meet in the supermarket, García lets them face each other and talk and react without the close-ups and reverse shots that are supposed to be obligatory. When a young woman is waiting for a man in a house where she used to live, García lets her wander around the yard for a minute, just visiting spots she once knew. When the little girl goes to pee, we wait for her with her mother. In other films these moments might seem lax, but García has woven them into the unabashed simplicity that he establishes early and that becomes important to us.

North Country

14 November 2005

Niki Caro is a New Zealand director whose last film, *Whale Rider*, was about a young Maori girl who insists on performing a ritual usually done by a man. Caro has now made a film in America, *North Country*, which is about a woman who insists on taking a job that has usually been done by men. The similarity between these films signals a feminist director, and feminism certainly must influence Caro's mind, but what matters most about her is that she is a gifted filmmaker. A woman who comes from the other side of the globe has made a film in an American locale about a specific line of work and has done it all with the atmosphere acutely rendered. The place is northern Minnesota in the winter, in iron range country, and we can almost smell the flannel of the shirts that many of the characters wear.

The film grew from the fact that in 1975 a mining company was forced to hire a woman because of a judicial decision. The screenplay by Michael Seitzman, based on a book by Clara Bingham and Laura Leedy Gansler, is set fourteen years later and deals with a fictional woman who joins the small corps of women in the male-dominated work crew of a mining company.

To give that story its place of being, Caro has created this world starkly: we almost fight for breath in the cold air before we go into the mine. Caro is aided tremendously by Chris Menges, the English cinematographer (and director), who puts the gritty settings before us unsparingly and who finds the character in every face, the harshness in every slag heap. These verities of person and place sustain the eventually thinned-out story.

A young woman named Josey Aimes, played by Charlize Theron, leaves her husband because he beats her. With her two children, she goes back to her parents who live near a mine in which her father has worked all his life. After a poor-paying waitress job, Josey decides to work in the mine herself—for six times the money and also, as she soon finds, for a hundred times more pestering and affronts from the men she works with. Her female co-workers—there are not many of them—are used to the daily filth of the remarks and drawings, but Josey, though she is no plaster saint, has a tough time bearing these assaults that are palmed off as jokes.

She complains to the management, and at long last, after she has been pushed around both by workers and executives because of her complaints, she resigns in order to initiate a class action suit against the company. A sympathetic lawyer (Woody Harrelson) appears with film-land aptness, and the case goes forward. (Despite the revelations about Josey's past sexual life, of which the defense tries to make much.) While Caro is giving maximum reality to the world where all this happens, the screenplay dips into coincidence and heart-tug. The last courtroom scene was presumably conceived as a set piece meant to live in cinematic history and is accompanied by a score that practically declares it.

But the contrast between setting and story isn't all that bars *North Country* from fulfillment. The major trouble is Theron. She plays Josey as well as is needed, but she is simply too beautiful. Josey has to be attractive in order to make her past believable, but Theron doesn't fit the milieu that Caro has created. An advantage of looking like, say, Meryl Streep is that (as in *The Bridges of Madison County*) she can be truly attractive but also credible as a farmer's wife. Theron is more limited by her looks. In *Monster* a few years ago she played a roadside hooker who becomes a serial killer, and she was made up to look like the character. Here, though her face is smudged from time to time, she is almost always gorgeous, and we keep thinking that she is silly to fuss with mining when she could at least be a model, possibly a film star.

It's odd, indeed, that Caro, a director keenly observant of everything physical, did not insist that Theron look like the woman she plays. It seems almost a concession to male chauvinism, allowing the protagonist of this grimy drama to look so exquisite.

Paradise Now

21 November 2005

The terms "terrorism" and "terrorist" seem to be two of the most frequently used words in the English language. Every day we encounter them in the media, related to some disaster, recent or new. It would be spurious to sigh for a past that was

always tranquil; nonetheless we cannot help feeling that the world has become much more continually ravaged with violence. And almost always it is principled violence, at least in the minds of the assailants. Nowhere are the principles more galvanic than in the suicide bombing raids carried out by Palestinians against Israel. In the midst—it looks like the midst, not the waning days—of these horrors, an Israeli-born Palestinian named Hany Abu-Assad has made a film called *Paradise Now* about two Palestinian terrorists.

The screenplay by Abu-Assad and the film's Dutch producer, Bero Beyer contains very little data that will be new to observers of this long and wretched situation. The Palestinians consider themselves imprisoned, cheated, humiliated. They can all remember killings and maimings of their people by Israeli raids (though there is no mention that those raids were usually a response to Palestinian raids). They writhe under Israel's giant military superiority, and they believe that their suicidal bombings are their only means of combat, bee stings on the giant that at least show defiance. And, most importantly, most frighteningly, these bombings are not solely patriotic, they are religious actions that transform the bombers into martyrs for their faith. Hence the film's title.

But, even though no reasonably well-informed viewer will learn much factual information from the picture, it grips; it even torments, because it lets us move and breathe and shiver and resolve with two particular young men. Said and Khaled are auto mechanics in Nablus on the West Bank and are members of a group of resisters. They are told just a day ahead of time that their leaders have chosen them for a bombing mission, which of course means their deaths. We spend that day with them, during which they may not speak to others of their mission. We sense the tacit pathos as they see family and friends. But it is not just our knowledge of where they are headed that chills us, not just the doubt (for most of us) that their deaths will carry them to heavenly glory; it is the brutal knowledge that they are only going to add their lives and as yet uncounted Israeli lives to utter wastage. Solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian trouble may come in time, though they seemed remote enough even before the president of Iran recently pushed them further off, but missions of this kind can hardly help. They seem more and more to be reduced to acts of self-justification.

A young Palestinian woman named Suha, who has spent much of her life abroad, tries to convince Khaled and Said that violence will not end violence, but by now they are bound with commitments, fraternal and private. We see the ritual of the farewell speech before a camcorder—technical trouble provides the film's only humorous episode. We see the two young men barbered and bathed and strapped with their bombs. We see them taken to a hole in the Israeli fence that has been cut by a paid Israeli Arab; we see the quick aborting of the mission, the separation of the two friends, and their delayed reunion in Israel. (Question: the first time they had to slip secretly through the fence. The second time Khaled is driven into Israel by two associates. How so?) Only one of the bombers remains there, however, to carry out the task.

But fulfillment of the mission is not the point of *Paradise Now*. Abu-Assad wants to transform the anonymous suicide bombers that we read and hear about in news reports into two young individuals, tremulous yet consecrated. Not many viewers will sympathize with their intent; but it is possible, despite the murders done by such men, to see them as still more members of the human race trapped in history.

Abu-Assad's directing is more adequate than fluent. Ali Suliman and Kais Nashef as the two young men are disquietingly convincing, and Lubna Azabal as Suha is fervent and clear. The poorest element in the film is the cinematography,

which is generally pallid. We can rationalize this, if we choose, by saying that the director wanted his film to look un-cinematic, as if it were stolen from reality.

Caché (Hidden)

6 February 2006

The new film year began at least one heartening way: Daniel Auteuil arrived in a new picture. This French actor is so incredibly credible, so unostentatiously fine, that he makes his way from film to film without attracting the hoopla that attends more consciously virtuosic actors. I mention here only two of his many roles. In *The Widow of Saint-Pierre*, set on that French island, Auteuil was a nineteenth-century army captain whose spiritual tenor changes while he waits for the arrival of a guillotine to execute a murderer in his charge. In *Après Vous*, a farce set in modern Paris, he was a restaurant manager who saves a man from suicide and then is stuck with this troublesome person. Those roles are two extremes in his dossier: there are manifold shades in between.

Juliette Binoche has had a career that is a bit less drastically varied but far from monochrome. In *The Widow of Saint-Pierre* she was Auteuil's wife, the chief instrument of his change. In the recent American *Bee Season*, a film otherwise well forgotten, she played a nutty French wife. Now she is again Auteuil's wife in their new picture *Caché (Hidden)*. (The American distributors apparently wanted to send a French signal but felt that they had to explain it.)

Auteuil plays Georges, the host of a literary roundtable that is a fixture on French television. Binoche is Anne, an editor in book publishing. The very presence of these two actors renews an under-appreciated pleasure. Films, despite all the trash that keeps barreling along, provide a chance to watch the evolution of acting talents. The obvious immediate examples are Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger, whose recent progress is fascinating. Often we hear complaints about the lack of repertory theater as a chance to see the development and range of actors. Of course films could not compensate for the lack of repertory—the succession of a film actor's roles is rarely planned. But to sit in a film theater and see Auteuil and Binoche come in, seasoned in our memories with the various human beings they have created, adding in every moment of their new roles to a treasury, is a benison.

Oddly enough, their presence in this picture turns out to be an anomaly. The writer-director of *Caché* was the German-born Michael Haneke, now in his sixties, who works in Germany, Austria, and France. His films concentrate on a unique blend of intelligence and violence. Most recently he made *The Piano Teacher*, based on a novel by Elfriede Jelinek (subsequently a Nobelist) that depicted the raging sexuality buried in a respectable woman. For *Caché*, Haneke has said that its starting point was "the desire to find a project for Daniel Auteuil, who had suggested a collaboration." This collaboration would clearly be more of an adventure for Auteuil, who was entering new territory, than for Haneke, who was, in effect, just continuing. Haneke also said, "At the same time I had been toying with the idea of writing a script in which someone is confronted with his guilt for something he did in his childhood." That theme is certainly the essence of the picture, but it takes some time to emerge.

The opening shot is of a house in a Paris street, the home of Georges and Anne, a shot in which nothing happens for what feels like more than a minute. Thus we know that this director is going to use time in his own way, not as it is usually

calibrated. Later we learn that the opening isn't even a shot in the usual sense; it is a tape that someone has made.

Georges is soon aware that he is being watched, that his life is often being taped. He tells the police, and they inform him that they can't do anything about it until something happens—until Georges is assaulted, for instance. He must simply keep living under this mysterious surveillance.

In time Georges follows clues that come up, and eventually he traces them to an Algerian man of about his age, who once lived on Georges's family's estate when they were both boys. The Algerian's parents were lost in the police massacre of protesters on October 17, 1961, and Georges, who was jealous of the other boy, told lies about him so that his parents would send his "rival" away. Thus the other boy lost the advantages of living with this well-off family. Now the Algerian, who is the merest prole, has a grown son: this son is the person who makes the tapes—for his father, who has some sort of revenge in mind.

All these matters are elements of a thriller, but nothing could interest Haneke less. Indeed, he almost revels in the contrast between thriller stylistics and his style. His film moves slowly, almost studiously. For instance, at one point the agitated Georges in his bedroom phones downstairs to Anne, who is in the living room with guests, pleading with her to come up and talk with him. Haneke does absolutely nothing to cover the time lapse: Georges simply waits until Anne comes up. Haneke is telling us obliquely that Georges and his guilt are in a postmodern world—where conventions are suspect—and will not be shoved into *film noir* regularities.

So an oxymoronic texture prevails. Auteuil and Binoche—and all the other actors—give performances in a realistic mode, while the film through which they move is structured in an anti-conventional way. There is no abrasion: this is not *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* with a "normal" cast. Haneke's characters live in the conventional world, but he assumes that they would understand our viewing them through an opposed postmodern temperament.

The climax of the story is horrible, shocking, and is handled quite casually. Afterward, Georges returns home, undresses, goes to bed, and dreams—remembers, really. His dream is of the crucial moment in the Algerian boy's life for which Georges was himself responsible. Haneke doesn't then return to the adult sleeping Georges after that last dream sequence. The closing titles ascend over it.

As with much art of our time—music, painting, sculpture, theater—*Caché* in a certain way affronts us. Its deliberate contravention of our expectations, and not necessarily stodgy expectations, is part of its intent. The familiar art of Auteuil and Binoche is part of Haneke's affront. Because of them, we expect something fresh but embraceable. But with their collaboration, almost their collusion, Haneke proceeds to upset us.

A trifle that insists on being noted. *Caché* takes place in summer, and through most of the picture Auteuil wears the same lightweight jacket. He is often seen from the rear, and that jacket is never pressed. In a small way those wrinkles are part of the picture's disguise—its deceptive nod to familiar realism.

The New World

13 February 2006

Then there's the Terrence Malick problem. He made his feature writing-directing debut in 1973 with *Badlands*, which was based on an actual Midwest

murder spree by two young people. The film was starkly directed, with an engrossing screenplay that blended perception and a kind of numbed compassion. It seemed to signal the appearance of an American “European” director (a perhaps patronizing term, yet apt). When we learned that Malick had been a teacher of philosophy at MIT, it increased our congratulations to ourselves on our good luck. An intellectual with true talent had entered our film world. The sun shone.

But dimmed. It was five years before the next Malick film, *Days of Heaven*, which dealt with the immigration of some Chicago people to the wheat country around 1900. Malick envisioned it as an ode to natural American grandeur, which was so marvelously rendered by Nestor Almendros’s camera that it almost overcame the film’s weakness as a story—but not quite. Oh well, we urged ourselves to think, a philosopher’s picture.

Ten years passed before we got the next Malick film, *The Thin Red Line*, based on James Jones’s novel about the invasion of Guadalcanal. This time any possible cogency and force were sacrificed to character study, and the philosopher ointment had a tougher time soothing us. Still, we could console ourselves with the idea that a thoughtful person had pondered long before he moved, and, whatever the result, it was at least the fruit of a considerable mind.

Now, eight years later, comes Malick’s next picture, only his fourth in thirty-two years, and it leaves us even more painfully pinned between discriminating ambition and flaccid result. *The New World* is a perfect title for the picture. This term describes the effect that America had on the first European arrivals, an effect well embodied here. In 1607 an English expedition lands in Virginia, establishes contact with the “naturals” (as they call the natives), and begins the long history of harmonies and wars between Europeans and Indians. What is most moving in these earlier sequences is Malick’s ability—with Emmanuel Lubezki’s cinematography—to recreate the enchantment of English eyes with sheer space. (Fellini once said that as a boy in Italy, he liked to go to westerns just to see unimaginable space.) A new world, indeed.

Right from the start, however, Malick seems determined to worry us. The score, credited to James Horner, soon introduces Wagnerian horns playing the Rhine theme from *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, and before we can deal with that astonishment, we get large sections of a Mozart piano concerto—all while the Englishmen are getting settled and the naturals are worrying about the settlers’ possible takeover. Quite apart from the fact that these scores lay a few centuries ahead, what relevance did Malick think they had to his film? And why did he want to distract us with puzzlement about it?

Filmic troubles increase. Captain John Smith, the only professional soldier in the English company, is played by Colin Farrell, whose insipidity in Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* helped to sink that film and does much to mar this one. A romance develops between Smith and (though her name is not mentioned) Pocahontas, the daughter of the local Indian king. This is historically false: she was in fact eleven or twelve years old at the time. And it isn’t helped by Q’orianka Kilcher in the role. As is often the case with “native” girls in films about white people abroad, she is meant to enrapture us with dreams of what we are missing in our straitened lives. This is beyond Kilcher’s power.

Troubles in this romance and larger troubles between the colonizers and the natives eddy about, but there is little sense of organism to the story. Everything new that happens seems merely an addition to what has gone before. At last Smith is summoned back to England. Pocahontas does her Dido-like lament, then consoles

herself with John Rolfe, who arrives soon after. Eventually they marry, and Rolfe takes her back to England. There, of course, we are surrounded by the formal gardens of English palaces, in contrast to American naturalness.

The opinion that Malick forces on us, out of the decades since his first (and last) good film, is that he can perceive but that his purely cinematic mind, the ability to transmute his ideas into sustained films, is weak. We are told that he cut fifteen minutes from *The New World* after its limited release in December, but this hasn't eliminated its languors and lags. (It still runs 135 minutes.) Sometimes—in the matter of Pocahontas's fate, for instance—it is simply confusing.

Malick continues to float along the edge of the American film world as an unusually intelligent personage who occasionally delivers the fruit of his meditations. But his role as adjunct philosophe is better than the films he eventually gives us.

Tsotsi

20-27 March 2006

An old myth tells of a bird that had to press its breast against a thorn in order to sing, which it then did beautifully. Political troubles have served as that thorn for some writers, and the end of those troubles has, along with its benefits, deprived them of their singing. George Konrád, the Hungarian author of major novels about the travails of life under totalitarianism, has dwindled as a novelist since democracy reached Hungary. Athol Fugard, the white South African author who wrote excellent plays about racial anguish in his country, has sent here no plays of note since racial oppression eased there. Presumably neither Konrád nor Fugard would want earlier conditions to return in order to help their writing; still, these facts exist.

A film director named Gavin Hood has found a way to keep Fugard present. He has adapted Fugard's only novel, *Tsotsi*, for the screen, and has directed the film, which just won the Oscar for Best Foreign Picture. The novel was written in 1961, before Fugard became internationally known, and he didn't even try to get it published. (See Russell Vandenbroucke's book on Fugard, *Truths the Hand Can Touch*.) In 1980, after Fugard became famous, the manuscript was discovered in a collection of his papers and, with some revision, was published. Now Hood has been moved to film it.

Fugard's plays are notable for their strong structure and driving truth. His best play, *Boesman and Lena*, which was dexterously filmed by John Berry in 2000, is, in my view, a great work that will last. *Tsotsi*, to judge by the film (I haven't read the book), is nowhere near that stratosphere. It is sentimental, but at least it is so purposefully sentimental that its very frankness of métier is helpful.

Its theme is of course racial. The title means "thug," in a South African native language, and it is the sobriquet of a nineteen-year-old black youth who lives in a slum outside Johannesburg. He is a member of a small band of criminals who steal and sometimes kill for a living. For *Tsotsi* himself, a flashback to his childhood explains his behavior; for the others, environment is enough. (Hood makes that environment a bustling organism.) One night *Tsotsi* hijacks a car after shooting the wealthy black owner in the leg. *Tsotsi* drives off and soon discovers that in the back of the car there is a baby. The moment that he discovers the baby, we discover the rest of the picture—in plot, anyway. Enforced paternity will alter *Tsotsi*'s character.

Left at that, the film sounds flimsy, but two factors make it sound. First, all the characters are seen with Fugard's empathic ruthlessness: he is humane but truthful.

Second, it is flawlessly acted. The cast is so good that a kind of counterpoint arises between the riskily lachrymose story and the firm verity of the acting. Two of the actors stand out. Tsotsi is played by Presley Chweneyagae (whose first name is as notable as his last): his emotional range and resources are continuously deepened as the film progresses. Terry Pheto, as a young mother who is forced to be the baby's wet nurse, is sullenly enchanting.

Their excellence, along with all the others, raises a familiar wonder about films from unusual sources. Quite evidently there is a substantial body of acting talent among South African blacks; some thirty-five years ago Fugard himself, in his New York productions, introduced us to gifted black South African actors. Word of theater activity there recurrently reaches us, and the quality of the acting in *Tsotsi*, its subtlety and skill, implies a theater culture in which these people can grow. Hood has clearly helped them and, in the knowing way in which he uses them, is almost boasting of the results. His cinematographer, Lance Gewer, has also helped greatly by immersing the action in a generally sepia light that supports the Fugard synthesis of naturalism and ache.

Friends with Money

1 May 2006

Nicole Holofcener was born in 1960, so she is about the same age as most of the characters in *Friends with Money*. This is the third film that she has written and directed: her first was *Walking and Talking*, which was admirable, and her second was *Lovely and Amazing*, which I missed. Her new film is extraordinary: it engages us from beginning to end without strong narrative, or narratives. It lives through the quality of Holofcener's dialogue and the performances that she has drawn from her actors.

With most films, it is easy to imagine that the writer got an idea for a story, then sat down to work it out. In this film, however, there is no central plot idea. Holofcener just wrote about some people she knows or knows about, presenting their lives and letting the plot chips, if any, fall where they might. Things do happen in her picture: the people don't merely sit and talk. But the nub of it is that the happenings are less interesting than the people. This is hardly a new approach. (Predecessors, in a way: *Laurel Canyon*, *The First Wives' Club*, *The Big Chill*.) But it is a tough method to sustain, and Holofcener does it without breathing hard.

The biggest of the difficulties, especially if the writer happens to be as witty as Holofcener, is to write dialogue that crackles without making us wonder how the characters thought up all those funny things they say. When I saw Neil Simon's plays—and laughed—I used to wonder who wrote these people's material for them. With Holofcener, this is not a problem. Her people are all smart enough and articulate enough to speak "spontaneously" as they do. For instance, a woman who had a poorly paid teaching job says that she "quit when the kids started giving me quarters." It is her line, not the screenwriter's.

This former teacher, Olivia (played by Jennifer Aniston), the youngest of the group, is the only friend without money and is now working as a maid. There are three others, all married, all well-off. Christine (Catherine Keener) writes screenplays with her husband; Jane (Frances McDormand) is a clothing designer; Franny (Joan Cusack) is, classically, just rich. All four live in the Los Angeles area and have known one another so long that when they get together, in pairs or trios or quartets, they

seem to be resuming conversation. Each knows the others' weak spots and hits them or not according to how much love she is feeling at the moment.

Holofcener gives each of the women some sort of story motion without making a big deal of it. Christine, who spends her days sitting opposite her collaborator husband, each with a laptop at the ready, has a professional quarrel with him that alters their relationship. Olivia becomes entangled with a man who says he is unemployed and is telling the truth, but for an unexpected reason. Sex, which apparently has reached Southern California, is of course immediate in their talk and lives. (To spice things further and to keep matters up to date, Jane suspects that her husband is gay.)

Aniston is just aggressively defensive enough about her housecleaning to increase her allure. One sequence in which, while she works, she puts on a burlesque French maid's outfit that her boyfriend brought her, is a diversion in the comfortably kinky. McDormand, who seems incapable of a false move or note in her acting, has a spat scene at a supermarket checkout that subtly crystallizes several social difficulties. Cusack has the least demanding role, and thus, for a change, she can handle it adequately. Keener, who has now been in all of Holofcener's films, continues to develop the remarkable talent that she showed from the start.

One more bow to Holofcener. Imagine the job that she chose to load herself with—trying to pitch this film to a possible producer. What would she say? "This is a picture about moneyed women today, with one of them non-rich for contrast, and how they chat and live." What would be the producer's response? Or try this one: "This film, though it has no special excitement or suspense, provides a slice of contemporary bourgeois life that will be valuable to social historians a hundred years from now." Both pitches are true; and if Holofcener actually used one or the other, she is all the more gifted.

World Trade Center

4 September 2006

Heralded by thunderous publicity—and numerous a priori judgments—Oliver Stone's new film arrives, one of the fifth-anniversary commemorations of September 11th. The title, *World Trade Center*, as with the titles of most forthcoming television pieces on the subject, is too large. No film, even ten times the two-plus hours of Stone's, could sustain that title. Stone has concentrated on one of the catastrophe's stories and has fashioned it well—with almost palpable physical detail, and with performances that never sink to exploitation.

The screenplay, a writing debut by Andrea Berloff, is based closely on fact. John McLoughlin was a sergeant in the Port Authority police force, and William Jimeno was a rookie member of the force. We see the two men leave their suburban homes on that September morning after affectionate moments with family (Jimeno's wife is pregnant) and report for duty at their headquarters. When word arrives of the first plane-and-tower collision, they and others head downtown. Soon the building they are in collapses. McLoughlin and Jimeno are both trapped in massive rubble, immobilized, within hearing distance of each other. (A third policeman, trapped near them, dies very soon.)

Stone, wisely, does not attempt to deal with the explosions themselves. We see only the shadow of a plane on one of the towers; we see—thank heaven—only one person jumping. At first the collision is treated by some people as merely an accident.

(Such an accident, relatively minor, happened in 1945 at the Empire State Building.) Then the tower bursts into flame and begins to disintegrate, and the other plane hits the other tower. Stone skillfully traces the transformation of the “accident” into a gigantic catastrophe.

Much of the film concentrates on the two trapped policemen: their attempts to converse and to cheer each other, their courage, their (willed) belief in rescue, their thoughts of family, even their memories and dreams. We, of course, know that they are going to survive; but they don’t.

Naturally Stone couldn’t make a whole film about two immobile men, so there are plentiful scenes of action, principally of the families of the two men, the wives’ and children’s agony, their scratching at the facts for hope. The rescue of the two men comes about by the one touch in the film that looks like Hollywood confection but is true. (Basically. Some different details are just coming to light.) A retired U.S. Marine staff sergeant in Connecticut hears the news, puts on his fatigues, goes to the site, talks his way past the police, eventually discovers the two men, and summons help.

That sergeant, sturdily played by Michael Shannon, says something as he leaves the film about the need for good men to go out there and avenge this attack: otherwise there isn’t a political note in the picture. Stone and Berloff concentrate on the disaster as such, which here is as apolitical as a mine collapse. Nicolas Cage as the police sergeant, Michael Pena as the rookie, and Maria Bello and Maggie Gyllenhaal as the two wives amply summon the different realities in which they find themselves. Stone, helped by the acute editing of David Brenner and Julie Monroe, along with the scary rendering of devastation by Seamus McGarvey’s camera, has created a disaster film that is muscular but reticent and, in a moving way, respectful. There is no trace of the previous virtuosic Stone dazzle. In fact, several commentators have congratulated him on his restraint.

These congratulations are worrisome. Certainly Stone showed restraint in *World Trade Center*: who would have had it otherwise? But I hope he hasn’t learned his lesson, as these comments imply, and from now on will choose only subjects that preclude his virtuosity.

Look at what Stone has done in his career. He has been one of the most adventurous, radical, and perceptive directors in American film history. As far back as 1986 in *Salvador*, he was upsetting popular acceptances. *Platoon*, which came in the same year, is the best film ever made about Vietnam. It is stained with some sentiment on the soundtrack that may have been added as a producer’s emollient, but it is nonetheless stark, terrifyingly truthful, superbly directed. (Stone, as everyone now knows, is a decorated infantry veteran of Vietnam.) *Wall Street* is a testament of the drooling, greed-hyped “Americanism” of the Reagan years. *Born on the Fourth of July*, also about Vietnam, presented Tom Cruise—Tom Cruise!—excellent in an impassioned role. *The Doors* had one of the sadly unappreciated fine performances of our time—Val Kilmer as Jim Morrison. *JFK* was grubbed over by historical literalists who forgot the factual liberties taken by Schiller, Kleist, and Brecht, among others, and who ignored the social perception, the cinematic imagination, with which Stone rendered the core of the film—the end of our national confidence in heaven’s blessing. *Natural Born Killers*, the most underrated of Stone’s works, is a breathtakingly surreal Walpurgis Night of the homicidal streak in America, so generously cosseted by films and television and press. Then came *Nixon*, which gave a wonderful actor (Anthony Hopkins) the extraordinary character of a man so uncomfortable in his body and being that he seemed to sublimate his discomfort through political lies.

Certainly Stone has participated in lesser pictures through the years and has himself made some quite conventional ones: *Any Given Sunday*, deftly handled but just one more football picture; *Alexander*, a stereotypical corpse that never breathed. For me, these two recent pictures in a way presage the directing of *World Trade Center*. They both show what those recent commentators call restraint.

To recognize what Stone has accomplished in his best pictures is, I believe, to salute a major talent in film history, especially noteworthy because those pictures do not merely triumph over convention—they explode it. Has he really now become a conventional director? *World Trade Center* could not have been made in the style of those earlier pictures, but was it no more than a chance for Stone to be both excellent and orderly? He is almost sixty. I hope that, as with the mature Buñuel and Bergman and Kurosawa and Ford, more unrestrained films lie ahead of him.

Volver

27 November 2006

It happens to almost every successful director, and it has certainly happened to Pedro Almodóvar: he has entered the Age of the Larynx. In this age, sheer talk—the interview—becomes as much a part of a director's life as anything other than directing itself. Almodóvar interviews flood the press, especially just before a new film appears. He is more supple and funny than most directors can be, but even he can indulge in interview lingo. (From a recent one: "What always attracts me, and it's almost a physical need, is a project that's completely different from my previous one." And: "I enjoy the transparency of neorealism.") Oddly, despite our experience, several of those interviews apropos of Almodóvar's new film, *Volver*, made us expect a film of his highest quality, which is high indeed. *Volver* disappoints.

After all Almodóvar's interview talk about returning to his roots (some of the film takes place in a village), the three months of rehearsal with his cast (no better ensemble playing than what we can see in any well-made picture), the very serious shopping and hair-styling (the usual amusing Almodóvar glitz), and the hints of spiritual depth, we get a porridge-consistency story, full of explanations rather than drama. It all hangs on two final revelations—one of them a reminder of Polanski's *Chinatown* and the other about a woman's return from the dead. (The title means "to return.") And this comedy-drama about people we are supposed to like allows them to murder a man, bury him, and forget about him: nothing whatever is done about the crime. Perhaps it is because he was male, and a beast; and not unusually in his work, Almodóvar's chief sympathy is with women. That unlucky man stumbled into the wrong film.

Penélope Cruz, gorgeous and talented, plays a restaurant employee, the mother of an adolescent girl, the wife of a louse, the sister of a hairdresser, and the niece of a decrepit aunt. All these factors and more are continually stirred around for most of two hours until we reach the plot tricks that clear up the difficulties. In transit these toings-and-froings are handled—despite the sludgy story—with Almodóvar's dexterity and also with typical Almodóvar settings and dress that just manage to be realistic instead of extravagant. But throughout we keep waiting for the real Almodóvar film, and it never arrives.

He made his reputation with pictures that crackled and spat and sliced and mocked the strict conventions of contemporary Spain—including the church. These films were refreshing in their daring, their chuckling vengeance, and, basically, the

realization that without all these oppressions he wouldn't be the artist he had become. In *Volver*, despite a few dabs of what is meant to be candor, I could see only one real glimpse of the old Almodóvar. At one point, Cruz visits her sister and says she has to piss. (That's the word in the subtitles.) We then get a three- or four-second shot of Cruz on the toilet. That shot is completely extraneous to the film, but we can almost hear Almodóvar deciding to throw a snippet to his old-time fans.

Most of the picture, however, is soap opera done by an artist—plotty complications, plotty illness (a woman develops cancer), petty quarrels, equally petty reconciliations—almost as if Almodóvar were showing us that Douglas Sirk, another artist turned soapist, is not forgotten. Our disappointment is not that he has left his earlier mode, but that he left it without conviction and drive. Instead, we feel only that he has exhausted the spirit that launched him and is now making up stories to keep busy. I suppose that if he keeps on in this latter-day manufacturing vein, we can expect more lengthy interviews.

An admiring word about Cruz. She seems to me the present-day film figure closest to Sophia Loren, very much a person of a particular culture but with global appeal—and with humor, warmth, extraordinary beauty, sufficient vulgarity, and sufficient class.

The Secret Life of Words

25 December 2006

The Spanish writer-director Isabel Coixet has been making films for some twenty years, but she is only belatedly becoming known in the United States. *The Secret Life of Words* is my first Coixet film, and it had something of the same effect as *Climates*, the recent film by the Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan. In both cases, the work is so finely made that as I watched, I kept regretting my lateness in coming to this artist.

Like Ceylan—like many a fine director—Coixet has made her film less as a drama than as the traversal of a state of mind, a mood. The story is just sufficient to keep the film mobile. What happens within the protagonist—the state in which we find her and the changes that do or don't occur—is the substance of the film. It is notable, too, that for a work that needed delicate reciprocity, Coixet brought together a team of international colleagues who nonetheless give the film a harmony that has nothing to do with their origins. Mixed crews are not rare in films, especially big ones, but this is not a symphony, it is a chamber work. Several of the producers—among them Pedro Almodóvar—are Spanish; Coixet (Catalan by birth) wrote the English-language screenplay apparently without assistance; the leading actress, Sarah Polley, is Canadian and plays with a slight foreign accent; the leading man, Tim Robbins, is a familiar American; the cinematographer, Jean-Claude Larrieu, and the art director, Pierre-François Limbosch, are French.

Begin with the last two, because we can imagine Coixet beginning with them. The theme of the film is silence, the prison-and-paradise of silence within a young woman who has her reasons for it. Coixet and Larrieu have designed a lighting scheme that makes the world true enough yet remote, and Limbosch has created interiors that are like slices of solid color, with spare furniture—all like elements of a mechanism. Thus, as in so many good films, everything we see is part of what the film is about.

Polley plays Hanna, a young woman working in a large noisy factory in (as we later learn) Denmark. As the workers file in, each takes a pair of earmuffs from a rack, except Hanna. She is deaf—but almost by choice. Her hearing aid, when she wants it to, brings her the world. She has, as again we learn later, her reasons for not wanting to hear. She simply progresses through her life as if following procedures in a manual. In fact, her boss calls her in to complain that in four years she has never been late, never missed a day. He virtually forces her to take a vacation.

We see her in her antiseptic apartment, packing her bag with some of her collection of many soap bars and little else. We follow her to (what is probably) Northern Ireland, where, through the film's one helpful coincidence, she learns that a nurse is needed on an oil rig out at sea. She is a trained nurse. She volunteers.

So now this self-isolated Hanna is on an isolated man-made island far out in the Atlantic, tending a patient who was temporarily blinded in an accident—which is, for a time, a parallel to her deafness. The rig is commanded by a taciturn elderly man who likes to be left alone. It is as if Coixet has winnowed out of the teeming complexities of life some threads of quiet that are always present in the tangle and here are drawn close for our wonder.

The patient, Josef (played by Robbins), though sometimes in pain and always in the dark, begins what he thinks is a playful dialogue with his nurse. But it takes some days before she can even respond to his teasings. In time, they grow confident with each other. He tells her of a childhood experience with his father that scarred him figuratively for life. She tells him of a more literal scarring, more horrible. She had been a student in Dubrovnik and had gone through experiences in the Balkan wars that not only destroyed her hearing and left her body decked with cicatrices, but made her content to move through life numbly. Eventually the Josef-Hanna story ends on shore as we might want it to do, but Coixet adds a brief postlude to take the predictable out of it.

More could be told—the one black member of the oil rig crew who also is usually alone because he is black; the two crew members who are heterosexual but embrace because they are isolated there at sea—but these are enough of the facts that Coixet has selected to support her theme. She makes us recognize that, though of course not everyone in the world is a Hanna, very many of us carry a silence within us that we treat as a burden and a treasure. Hanna's silence was forced on her; yet she is still somewhat reluctant to give it up.

Polley has made a reputation as an actress with the ability to convey thought. I add that she has another valued asset in an actor: she knows how to listen. Robbins fills a screen nicely and keeps us interested in what he says and feels. Julie Christie, the darling of *Darling* in 1965 and now hardly recognizable, is intelligent as a Danish guidance counselor. Coixet's directing is generally minimal: she does only what is needed. This includes her traveling shots around the oil rig in fair weather and foul, and her long shots of it as an outpost in the middle of nowhere.

Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams

5 March 2007

In one way, some hot news stories are like Broadway shows. When they arrive, they get tremendous attention, which diminishes at different speeds, and then suddenly they disappear. Completely. Other hot news has replaced them. The Broadway shows that have had their day simply evanesce, but the people where the

hot news happened are still there. We can't expect the media to center on places or persons after a crisis has passed; but it is healthful to remember that, where that crisis happened, people are still living their lives. They don't evanesce.

Speak the word "Sarajevo" and any sentient person has an emotional memory of what happened there. But life didn't stop in Sarajevo when the reporters and the camera crews moved on (when the show closed). Battle and bloodshed are, thankfully, no longer on hand, but what is very much there is the life that was affected by the war. *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams* sensitively explores it.

Grbavica is the name of a district in Sarajevo right across from where the writer-director of this film lives. She is Jasmila Zbanic, a young woman who has made shorts and now makes her feature debut with commanding skill. Zbanic focuses on a woman in her forties and her twelve-year-old daughter. The father, we are told, was killed in the war, slaughtered by Chetniks, and is therefore a *shaheed*, a war martyr.

Esma, the mother, is a waitress in a bar-disco (where some pretty wild discoing goes on). Sara, the daughter, is of course in school. They are as affectionate and quarrelsome with each other as loving mothers and daughters usually are. The invisible presence of the father is a factor in their lives. That father helps Sara in a tussle she has with a schoolmate, a boy about her age, on a soccer field. (His father, too, was a *shaheed*.)

A quasi-romance develops between Sara and the boy, more like a touching rendition of how a young male and female learn to behave with each other within a periphery of good feeling. Meanwhile Esma attracts a man who works in her bar, and a mature version of her daughter's romance develops: two people who know from varieties of experience what an affair will mean to them and who want to enjoy each other's company before rushing in. (Sara is naturally jealous of Esma's other interest.) Perceptively, Zbanic concentrates on these stories that would have happened if there had never been a war, thus depicting some persistences in human beings, but she lets both the characters' remembrance of the war and the spectators' remembrance of it serve as backdrop and atmosphere. So these relatively ordinary stories carry with them both a tacit poignancy and a glimmer of hope for the obstinacy of life.

The cinematographer was Christine A. Maier, who helped greatly by putting everything before us in a lucid, matter-of-fact way; no fanciness. Zbanic is, of course, responsible—admirable, rather—for employing dailiness as a medium for depth. And her screenplay ends with a revelation that puts everything we have seen in an even more somber postwar light.

But it is the two leading performances that make the film seem almost to reach down and embrace us. Mirjana Karanovic, who plays Esma, is famous in her own country but is probably known here, if at all, for her role in *When Father Was Away on Business*. She is a reassuringly complete actress. About Luna Mijovic, who is Sara, there is the usual news that the director and others auditioned and tested hundreds of girls for the role until they found Mijovic. This time we can truly be glad that they persisted, because she is a delight. A bit too old to be considered a prodigy child who acts well without any knowledge of film, Mijovic—who is making her debut here—is not misled into imitation because of her previous filmgoing. With Zbanic's help, she cuts straight to the core of what is needed in each scene, with a kind of arriviste freshness that is the result of talent, not naïveté. More of Mijovic, please.

Note. Once again a foreign film is distinct from a domestic product because of the smoking. Incessant here.

The Wind That Shakes the Barley

2 April 2007

Ken Loach, who has spent much of his directing career investigating political messes, takes another look at the Irish Troubles. A television series called *Days of Hope* was made in 1975; *Hidden Agenda* came in 1990. Now there is *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. (This hazardous title comes from an Irish patriotic poem by Robert Dwyer Joyce.) The material is very familiar: films dealing with Irish revolt against British occupation are hardly novel. Even the split among the rebels themselves, after the treaty with England was signed, was filmed not long ago. *Michael Collins*, with Liam Neeson as “the Big Fellow,” came through in 1996.

Loach’s one claim to originality has made big trouble for him. His film begins in 1920, and very soon it plunges graphically into the brutality of British soldiers attacking rebels and suspects with a violence that presumably has truth in it because of the objections that these scenes have raised in the British press. I can’t remember equivalent savagery in any other film on this subject. Few have said that the violence is false; most have argued that there was no need to dig into it again—particularly at this time.

But Loach makes a point of showing that violence is not any nation’s monopoly. After the treaty was signed in 1921 creating the Irish Free State as a British dominion and retaining the six northern counties for Britain, a splinter group of Irish absolutists battled those Irishmen who had signed and agreed. Violence, especially ghastly because it was between Irishmen, soon followed, and dissident Irishmen were imprisoned in camps. I knew one such man in his later years—Frank O’Connor, the masterly author, who said: “The Free State Party . . . accepted the treaty with England, and the Republicans . . . opposed it by force of arms, as the Irgun was later to do in Israel.”

These final scenes give a twist, a special irony, to a picture that, convincingly made though it is, seems a bit familiar all through. Loach’s cast fits perfectly, and his directing has his usual extra tang of commitment. He provides almost a sensory response to his material: we seem to feel the textures and scent the air. Here he depends, rightfully, on the cinematography of Barry Ackroyd. All the agonies and brutalities in this film take place in a country that is exquisite, seemingly created for peace. The leafy lanes and thatched cottages are used by Ackroyd unostentatiously: there is a constant contrast between what life ought to be here and what it is.

Private Fears in Public Places

23 April 2007

Alain Resnais’s career has been long, fertile, and a bit sad. In 1959 his first feature, *Hiroshima, mon amour*, caused a worldwide critical stir, and his second, *Last Year at Marienbad*, heightened it. (One French critic, his name happily forgotten, said that anyone who didn’t consider *Marienbad* the greatest film ever made had no right to be a critic.) Resnais has since made more than fourteen films, and now, at age eighty-four, he presents a new one.

At the start, his work involved prominent writers of the day. His first three films were written (respectively) by Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Jean Cayrol, and although Resnais was never a member of the New Wave, he was

considered one of the postwar filmmakers who were re-establishing French film in the aesthetic vanguard. Besides playing with time and traditional narrative, some of his films, such as *La Guerre est finie*, were politically courageous. Moreover, his work helped to realize the stature of some leading actors: Yves Montand in *La Guerre*, Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Stavisky*.

Despite all this and much more, Resnais is now rarely considered a major figure in French film. When his name comes up, he is always called masterly, but—other than the hardly minor fact that his work is dexterously made—it isn't easy to define his mastery. What happened to the director whose pictures were once said to be changing the film art? In *Republic of Images*, Alan Williams writes that “as [Resnais's] career progressed, he clearly decided to moderate his taste for the formal experiments of avant-garde literature, in order to continue to interest audiences in his works.” But this silky arraignment of Resnais as a sell-out is insufficient. No Resnais film that I have seen has struck me as a sell-out. At their direst, Resnais's films have seemed the work of an avant-gardist who, like avant-gardists in other arts, has exhausted his innovations and is needy.

His new picture, *Private Fears in Public Places*, isn't even quite that poignant. The screenplay by Jean-Michel Ribes, set in Paris, is based on a play by the mid-tier English playwright Alan Ayckbourn (a choice that is a gentle index of intent). From its opening we feel ourselves relaxing with almost disappointing ease. A trustworthy driver is at the wheel, but he is not taking us anywhere new.

An immediate trouble is the décor. Jacques Saulnier, who heads the design team here, has been the art director for many of Resnais's films. Thus, early in his career, Resnais found a designer who could bring into being the look of a film he had envisioned. And Saulnier, alas, seems to be filling that function again here. What first impresses about *Private Fears* is the look—a cocktail lounge, a hotel restaurant, a real estate office. They are all somewhat self-consciously *moderne*. They tell us that we are amid people who want to be a bit ahead of the up-to-date. The settings thus hint something about obediently chic standards.

It is winter; sequences are separated by views of snowfall, as if heaven were providing a curtain from time to time. The contrast between designed surface and inevitable nature can be seen, with a little generosity, to represent the torque of the screenplay.

This is one of those films that tell several independent stories with no immediate connection, and we watch connections emerge. A soldier who has been dishonorably discharged and his wearying girlfriend; a real estate agent with an uptight sister; the agent's secretary, who seems oppressively religious; a suave bartender with a vicious bedridden father—all are presented more or less as the world sees them, and then we discover secrets in each that link several of them. The private fears become manifest in places that are more public than was presumably wanted.

Experienced hands could manufacture such screenplays by the carload. Yet the picture is so suavely made that we don't feel disappointed until it is over: what chiefly holds us is the quality of the acting. All of the relatively small cast move through their lives like figures in a well-crafted design, but they discover the design only at about the same time as we do ourselves. Pleasant though that design may be, we are left at the end with a question. Why was it worthwhile? Eighty-four or not, what happened to the irruptive, exploratory Alain Resnais?

Away from Her

21 May 2007

What a treat it is to watch Sarah Polley's career flourish. First, her acting. A few months ago she was in *The Secret Life of Words*, where she created a young woman stilled by gross experience. Now, after directing several shorts, Polley has directed her first feature, *Away from Her* (in which she does not appear). More: the screenplay is her own adaptation of a story by Alice Munro. *Away from Her* is extraordinary—delicate, seriously disturbing, and lovely.

Polley, born in 1979, is a Canadian who studied acting in London (with Albert Finney, no less), then came home and began working, particularly for Atom Egoyan in two films, one of them the memorable *The Sweet Hereafter*. (Egoyan is an executive producer on this new film.) She soon began making shorts. Then she discovered the Munro story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," was enraptured, and was at last enabled to make a film of it. Appropriately, the story has just been reprinted on its own, using the film's title. In Polley's preface, she writes that after first reading the story, "I returned to it many times in the following months, trying to make sense of the hold it had over me." By whatever means, family experience among them, she has found the answer and has realized it exquisitely on film.

Munro's story is about one of the dangers of living. We are all open to attack by physical mysteries that we do nothing to invite and can do nothing to avoid. Alzheimer's is prime: nothing need be done to incur it, little can be done to repel it. It is like a large soft cloud that floats up unbidden and gradually envelops. For a time, perhaps a long time, it doesn't even frighten the individual. The magnificent simplicity of Munro's story is that she tells it without a sob, simply as the arrival of something in a woman who is unaware of it for a while and therefore unafraid. Her loving husband can see quite clearly what is happening and must eventually—in a sense helplessly—take necessary steps. Munro relates all this in prose that is so unadorned as to be beautiful, so unmaneuvering that it grips, so direct that it is wise. (Quite rightly, the screenplay relies a good deal on Munro's dialogue.)

Grant, a retired professor, and Fiona, his wife, have lived happily in a Canadian university town for many years. Grant has had some encounters with female students, but they have not rippled the peace of his marriage. Suddenly Fiona, an unfussily competent woman, begins to leave strange little reminder notes to herself around the house, and some small oddities in her behavior begin. "I don't think it's anything to worry about," she says, "I expect I'm just losing my mind." An offhand, household witticism.

Inevitably, matters lead in the course of months to the nursing home, very clubby on the first floor. The second floor is for patients who are—in that weird term—advanced. The superintendent, Madeleine, a woman whose charm seems to be freshly ironed every morning, informs Grant that he will not be allowed to visit for the first thirty days. His objections do not prevail, and at the end of the month he is surprised, even dismayed, to find that Fiona has settled in chummily and is glad, though not relieved, to see him.

In the nursing home Fiona has become particular chums with Aubrey, a man whom she thinks she knew before. Aubrey weeps and trembles when she leaves him to be with Grant on his visits. Madeleine tells Grant that attachments like Aubrey and Fiona's are common but have no serious import. Grant goes to visit Aubrey's wife, Marian, with a suggestion that would at least interrupt the hospital friendship. Marian

is not interested. Still, Polley's only alteration in Munro is to fulfill something that is merely foretold in the story.

The air of the film, almost the literal atmosphere through which everything moves, is made for us by the two principal actors. Julie Christie, the Golden Girl of British film in the 1960s, has of late done some intelligent acting. She was the Queen in Branagh's *Hamlet*, and she was notable in a minor role in *The Secret Life of Words*. Polley has said that thinking about Christie and at last getting her agreement to play Fiona were crucial to the film. Christie's Fiona is a small paradox. It is not, in itself, exceptional acting. Emma Thompson, for instance, if she could have managed to age a bit for the role, would exceed Christie in art. But Christie's sheer understanding of the woman brings her into haunting life.

Gordon Pinsent, the mature Canadian actor who plays Grant, was, I'm truly sorry to say, unknown to me despite his extensive career in the theater and on screens large and small, mostly in his own country. He is one of those immediately embraceable actors who can think, who can make inner action as clear as anything he says or does. Through all the difficulties of color and intent in his role, Pinsent is like an exceptionally strong man handling weights, with both consideration and ease.

But these two actors and everyone concerned with *Away from Her* owe the chance to spend their abilities on this extraordinary film, as no doubt they would agree, to the passion of Sarah Polley for the project and to the talent with which she has realized it. Her directing flows and interweaves; and she has an enlarging quality of reticence, which makes key moments strong by not exploiting them. But her master touch is in evolving the chill, even on the sunniest days, that is enveloping Grant as he watches the cloud approach and Fiona equanimously welcoming it. Oh, how I hope there will soon be another film directed or acted by Polley.

Chop Shop

13 March 2008

Laments about the decline of cinephilia are familiar, and in the main they are just. Little is left of the film frenzy that embroiled college generations through the 1960s. But that is the view from the audience side; there is a different view that contests the decline. Cinephilia is not declining at its roots, because new filmmakers of quality continue to appear. The waning of the so-called Film Generation has not affected them. These people, usually young, absolutely cling to film as the nearest and best means of responding to their experience and exalting in their imaginations. Here, for an extraordinary instance, is Ramin Bahrani with *Chop Shop*.

Bahrani is of Iranian stock and has lived for a few years in Iran, but he is a New Yorker (educated at Columbia). His new film, which is his second feature, is about Willets Point in Queens, a sizable district of grimy automobile repair shops: an acreage of hustle, of grab and anger, of dealings on the sly. Cars of all kinds keep flooding through the picture like incessant threats and boasts.

Willets Point itself is to that metallic horde like a dump of detritus along the way. "Chop shop" is argot there for a supposed repair place that disassembles stolen cars and sells the parts. The men who do the work are, in a sense, part of the coursing landscape behind them. Their skill at what they do, their brawling, their triumphs and aggressions, their complete disregard of anything but themselves, suggest that they consider themselves damned anyway and might as well go whole hog.

When Bahrani discovered Willets Point, sometimes called the Iron Triangle, he was captivated. (I'm using the press notes as fact, which in this case are close to what we would infer anyway.) His response, he obviously felt, could be conveyed only in a film. Good dramatists view their experience through a theatrical frame; good painters view it as the stuff of painting. Filmmakers, and Bahrani is a born one, transmute their waking and dreaming minutes into film: every experience important to them is prime to be transmuted into light and shadow and frame, into a kinesis that will not only clarify its being but complete it. Bahrani's response to Willets Point is that response in essence. What Dziga Vertov did for Moscow in his documentary *Man with a Movie Camera*, Bahrani does for this section of Queens—except that he chose a more difficult method.

Chop Shop is not a documentary: it is fiction of a dangerous kind. All the while that the film is telling its story, fulfilling it intrinsically, making it much more than an armature, it is also saying that the story is not the prime concern. The setting in a real sense formed the characters we are watching. The setting is the picture's basic reason for being. The screenplay by Bahrani and Bahareh Azimi tells a story that holds us, but—in a helpful sense—only minimally. It provides a ground plan for Bahrani as the filmic discoverer of Willets Point.

That story features Alejandro, known as Ale, a twelve-year-old Latino—many of the people in the film are Latino—who works in a chop shop owned by gray-haired Rob, who treats him as a tolerable, useful nuisance. Ale knows the ins and outs of the car-chopping trade and runs a few small scams of his own. (Peddling stolen DVDs is one of them.) He saves money, hiding cash in a can that he buries secretly. His sixteen-year-old sister turns up, having left her previous place (a questionable one is suggested), and bunks with Ale in the small room that he has in the back of Rob's chop shop. She gets a job as a waitress in a food van, but she has another source of income, too. The central action is Ale's discovery that his sister is a hooker. (In this auto-mad story, her assignations take place in the driver's cab of a truck.) Ale's eventual reaction to the fact is, in its way, a confirmation of Willets Pointism.

One of Bahrani's triumphs in this picture is the performance of Ale, drawn from a boy named Alejandro Polanco. Bahrani obviously worked with him to eliminate any sense of performance, to make him feel and behave like an animal in its native habitat. The boy lives there. Yet when Ale spends his well-scrunged cash on a decrepit food van that he hopes to refurbish, it seems just the sort of sentimental flaw that might sucker a generally smart kid. (Bahrani's first feature, *Man Push Cart*, is about a Pakistani who has a food cart in New York.) Polanco may have a future as an actor, but we can remember that film history is full of amazing performances by children who were little seen thereafter. The fact that a film performance can be assembled bit by bit like a mosaic may have something to do with this oddity. In any case, young Polanco verifies this picture as he goes.

His sister is played by Isamar Gonzales, and her acceptance of her situation is done with an air of "this is what comes with the territory"—not just Willets Point but her social status. Rob is played gruffly by Rob Sowulski, who actually owns the chop shop where Ale works. Sowulski, too, manages to forget the camera completely, doing what is far from easy: being himself.

Bahrani was his own editor, excellently so. The visual effect is a series of images swiveling past with a few figures who are in them constantly. The purpose is not in the details but in the overall effect—life in this way-stop of cars in motion. For instance, twice in the film we see a fist fight between two men—two different pairs—but each fight is left unfinished. The point is not to find a cause or a victor in these

fight but to show us more of the texture of Willets Point. Bahrani's visionary union of writing and directing and editing lifts the picture out of facile naturalism into a shadowy species of ode.

Tuya's Marriage

7 May 2008

Surprising things happen in *Tuya's Marriage*. A herd of sheep pushes across the screen, then the herdsman rides in—on a camel. We learn that the herdsman is actually a woman. Later, she rides out on that camel in a snowstorm to find her son, a storm that has been reported to her by radio. For a party in a big town, this woman, who lives in a crude house, goes to a luxe hotel whose name is displayed in English. All these surprises occur in Mongolia.

The director, Wang Quan'an, makes no special point of these oddities: they are merely part of the lives that the film enters. Sheep herding and the vast Mongolian plains are not new subjects, but Wang uses them as the means by which to summon Tuya. She is a young woman who, in Lu Wei's screenplay, is a source of strength, courage, taciturnity, competence. Tuya has two children and is the wife of a herdsman, Bater, who cannot work owing to a recent leg injury. It is Tuya who keeps the family going.

Bundled from head to foot, solid, swift, she is as much a force as a woman. Another surprise is that she is ultra-practical in an unexpected way. Loving wife though she is, after a lumbar dislocation she is willing to divorce the disabled Bater in order to marry a man willing to support both of them. A fiery young herdsman, distraught with his own marital troubles, is mad about Tuya, especially after she announces her unusual divorce plans. But he is outpaced by wealthy men who offer Tuya what she wants—comfort for herself and her children, plus care for Bater—if she will marry one of them. Added to the surprises is our conviction that this woman, this swathed prole of proles, is exactly what those men think she is— a nuptial prize.

But this is not a marital comedy glistening with surprises: it is too close to labor and pain and fear. Tuya is a kind of swaddled goddess. When her son is frightened of wolves during that snowstorm, she hugs him and says, "Don't worry. Mama will eat the wolves." We can believe it.

The story is intricate, unexpectedly so, because we assume that these are simple people whose needs and drives and thoughts are elemental. What we may overlook is that elemental drives do not exclude complicated means, such as Tuya's divorce proposal. Anyway, simple or otherwise, these people live on a figurative border. The way they dress and house and clothe themselves, eat and drink, seems ancient, yet modern trucks and the swanky automobile of a visitor imply that the next generation or two will be much less firmly strapped to the past.

Wang, whose mother was born in the vicinity of the film's locale, puts this place and these lives before us with affection and admiring rigor. He is magnificently aided by the German cinematographer Lutz Reitemeier, who worked with him on a previous film. To Reitemeier, colors are feasts. Some shots might have been calendar art—though gorgeous, not saccharine. A wedding party near the end, with everyone arrayed in breathtaking finery, is handled by Reitemeier with almost the extra dimension of impasto painting. (The resplendent clothes are another surprise.)

Most of the cast are non-professionals, but all them provide what is needed of them. A man called Senge, who plays the firebrand, could certainly be useful in more

films. Tuya is played by Yu Nan, a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, who has been in two previous Wang films. For the first minutes of her performance, we wonder how Wang found a nonprofessional Mongolian woman who could fulfill this complex role; soon we see that he found an actress who could truly inhabit it. Yu's acting is surreptitiously subtle. And note her hands. She has understood that the performance of a laboring person begins with the hands.

Flight of the Red Balloon

7 May 2008

An estimable Asian director, Hou Hsiao-Hsien of Taiwan, has found his inspiration on the other side of the world—or rather in a film made there. In 1956, Albert Lamorisse, a French director, made a thirty-four-minute film called *The Red Balloon* that quickly became a pet in art houses and universities and film societies everywhere. Set in Paris—lovingly—the picture follows a small boy as he follows the travels of a red balloon through the skies over the city, as it floats up and down, wandering, pausing, seeming to tease. Watching the film was like having a brief pleasant dream. Now Hou, enchanted by the picture, has used it as the launch site for a film that he was asked to make about Paris. Result: *Flight of the Red Balloon*.

Which is precisely where it begins. A boy in present-day Paris is watching a red balloon in the sky, speaking to it as he walks and gambols along the street, calling to it to come down. But it ignores him. The boy goes home to his mother, played by Juliette Binoche. Mother is an actress doing voices in a puppet theater for children. She has another child, a daughter who lives in Brussels and sometimes comes to Paris, and she has a husband—or at least a companion—who is now in Montreal. She engages a young Taiwanese woman, a film student (she is herself remaking *The Red Balloon*!), as a nanny for her boy while she herself keeps on the move. These are the chief figures of a non-exciting, interesting story.

Hou states that his script supplied only the events and that the cast improvised the dialogue (the method of the *commedia dell'arte* centuries earlier). Well, the dialogue, to trust subtitles, is all right, but the story that Hou provided is no more than a series of occurrences. All that happens is that we observe some lives (not through the instrumentality of the balloon), and we roll along with them, discovering yet again that the daily doings of nice-enough people, if warmly presented, can fascinate.

Warmth is not Hou's only quality. He has a sense of texture. One long scene set in the small messy living room of Binoche's apartment begins with a blind piano tuner being brought in and setting to work at one side. Then Binoche comes home, quarreling with a neighbor downstairs, after which there are scenes with her boy and a telephone conversation with her distant daughter. Through all this activity, the piano tuner keeps plinking. What holds us through this scene is to some degree the interest we now have in these people, but mostly it is the way the whole scene is composed. Sometimes when listening to an orchestra, we think, "Ah, he added the bassoon just in time. Now the cellos save the day." Hou's scene affords the same sort of structural experience.

Binoche continues to show more versatility than was predictable in her early career. The boy is unactorish and taking. But a puzzle remains about the whole film. What is the relationship of the red balloon to this picture? To the portrayal of Paris à la Lamorisse? For long stretches the balloon disappears and is forgotten by the boy. At the end it reappears and drifts away over Paris as if it had fulfilled its mission and

is now off to further adventures. But it has had none here. We can be glad that Lamorisse's picture stimulated Hou to work in Paris, but any number of other French films might have done the same in this utterly unrelated way.

Stuff and Dough

28 May 2008

At any given moment, it seems that there is one foreign country pouring out rewarding films like a new oil gusher: Germany in the 1970s, Iran in the late 1980s, China in recent years. Obviously these countries had good films past and future, but the concentrated outpourings were extraordinary.

The latest such country is Romania, with *12:08 East of Bucharest*; *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*; and *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*. The last, by Cristi Puiu, won many viewers with its physiological data. They may be disappointed in his new film, *Stuff and Dough*, which has excremental details only at the start, then moves into a very different mode, supple where the earlier picture was stolid.

Ovidiu is a young man in Constanta who is the son of small shopkeepers and hopes to have a shop of his own quite soon. He is hired by a saturnine man called Ivanov to take a box of medicines to Bucharest, four hours away, and to get them there by a certain time that day. Ivanov, who will pay well, is stern about the urgency, and he finally gets Ovidiu in motion. The young man sets off jauntily in his van, accompanied by his pal Vali, who brings along his (uninvited) girlfriend.

About Romanian audiences we can't say, but American viewers will know at once that those medicines are in fact illegal drugs and that Ovidiu and friends are getting mixed up in the underworld. Although this must become clear early to an audience here, it comes much more slowly to Ovidiu and Vali. The startling finish confirms the crime element. What we keep asking ourselves throughout is, Haven't Ovidiu and Vali ever been to the movies? How can they not know what is happening?

It is possible that they are slow in the matter because Romania was for so long under a dictatorship that controlled absolutely everything, including films. Happily, in this picture the new freedom for Romania is at least as evident in the direction as in its subject. Very much of it is shot in the van in which the three youngsters are riding, most of it done with a handheld camera in the back seat behind the two young men. The persistence of freehand camera movement, the offhand veristic dialogue, the general sense that the way to make a film is to throw away rules and follow impulse: all this is pure Godard—early Godard, too, when he was liberating himself, before he became the doyen of liberation. Puiu cites other influences, but those long sequences in the car seem pure 1960s Godard.

All the better for it. The pleasures in this picture are to some degree in the sheer behavior—hardly to be called acting—of the principals, but Puiu's directing helps even more. By cinematically flying instead of trudging, he has freshened a worn subject and, in Romania, has apparently brought the twentieth century into the twenty-first.

Mongol

25 June 2008

Tolstoy was the source of an earlier Sergei Bodrov film, *Prisoner of the Mountains*, a subtly shaded drama about two Russian soldiers. Bodrov's new film, *Mongol*, could hardly be more different. *Prisoner* was a film that existed as a vehicle for characterization; *Mongol* has just enough characterization to sustain its own reason for being—cinematic fullness.

Here he tells the story of the boyhood and youth and early manhood of Genghis Khan, before the world conqueror acquired that title (he was then called Temüjin). Bodrov, who wrote the screenplay with Arif Aliyev, clearly wanted to revel in all the visual possibilities—extravagances, sometimes—that the story would permit, and he makes the lavish most of them. Some of us occasionally mourn the passing of screen epics that stunned us with size and sweep. Bodrov to the rescue. Possibly with digital help, he packs the screen with the prodigality that we sometimes guiltily miss. What basically gives the picture its particular power is the fact that a highly talented director is having a great time making an old-fashioned picture, certainly with ingenuity and vision but with pleasure in its plenty rather than small-scale finesse.

Oh, there is surface sobriety. *Mongol* life and customs in the late twelfth century are treated gravely. The boy Temüjin, about nine, is taken by his father to a distant tribe to choose his future bride. On the way, however, they stop overnight with other people, and a local girl called Borte boldly chooses him. He responds, boyishly. His father clucks, but the juvenile engagement lasts through life—through several kinds of life.

The chief pride of these Mongol men is fighting; individual combat and war are their code, their purpose. (The cast breathes fire and cunning.) We see Temüjin as a youth in his first fights and battles, his alliances and enmities; we see the young man glorying even further in his soldiering. His various battles, interwoven neatly with his happy marriage to Borte, are fierce. In one episode, he even spends some time, after capture by an enemy, as a stiff-necked slave. In fact, there is enough action in his life before he becomes Genghis Khan (which we learn only in a closing credit) to fill a film—this one.

One incident has depth beyond the warrior code. Borte is kidnapped by an enemy after her marriage, and by the time Temüjin rescues her, she is pregnant. Unhesitatingly he takes her back, asserting loudly that the child is his, though it may not be. Immediately we think of the moment in John Ford's *The Searchers* when John Wayne rescues Natalie Wood from a tribe that has kidnapped her and almost kills her because she has been defiled. Temüjin is more generous.

Other reminders of Ford abound, as well as reminders of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, in the magnificent vistas of riders distant on the steppes, often in the snow. The climax of the picture is an immense battle between Temüjin's army and his half-brother's. (A thunderstorm breaks, pictorially helpful, during the battle.) Olivier's *Henry V* and Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* must also be tucked away in Bodrov's head, and all to the good.

Mongol, like its epic predecessors, is more than principally male: it is a ballad in the poetics of masculinity. (Borte is another version of Penelope, the woman who waits for her man.) It is not just about what men did and do, it is a flight from fact into juvenile fantasy, muscled with adult power. But where sword-slicing pictures often

bore quickly, *Mongol* grips us. Bodrov knows so precisely what he is doing and why that we almost feel we are viewing a connoisseur's example of a species.

The Last Mistress

30 July 2008

The French director Catherine Breillat uses plentiful sex in her films. This is notable not for its candor, a quality that is nowadays general, but for its cunning purpose. Her easy, open attitude toward sex makes the viewer wonder (this seems to be Breillat's plan) what the difference is between her films and pornography. So we consider the context of those naked scenes even more thoroughly, and we decide that the context gives her films a thematic texture that pornography never has. The sex thus emphasizes the non-sexual.

Breillat has done it again in *The Last Mistress*, which she adapted from a novel by the prodigal nineteenth-century author Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. Paris in 1835 is where it begins, with a visit by a handsome and wealthy young gentleman, Ryno de Marigny, to his longtime mistress, Vellini. He tells her that he is finished with her; he is marrying a young woman, Hermangarde, whom he loves. Vellini, Spanish-born, a Carmen with more money and better taste, is sure that he will be back.

One evening Marigny is with Hermangarde's grandmother. She knows, as does all Paris, about Vellini, and she charmingly but hungrily asks him to recount his affair. This tale is a large part of the film: it takes Marigny all of one night. He fell in love with Vellini when she was married to an elderly English aristocrat. Marigny persisted; she repulsed. Soon the husband challenged him to a duel. Marigny fired in the air, and the husband wounded him in the chest. As the surgeon was taking out the bullet, Vellini burst into the room and licked the blood from his chest.

Thus began their affair. (The English husband disappears.) The two lovers fled to Algeria, where La Vellini gave birth to their child. The child died, and, true to her wild romanticism, Vellini wanted to burn the body in the desert. They did. She and Marigny, seized by emotions they couldn't and didn't want to understand, made love next to the burning body of their child.

Marigny's account winds to its close, and the grandmother relishes it all. The wedding soon takes place. Hermangarde expects fidelity, and Marigny expects it too of himself, but Vellini has other plans. The picture reaches a conclusion that none of the three principals had foreseen.

As the story moves along, the old Breillat question arises through the vivid sex scenes: why isn't this pornography? Definitions of pornography are booby traps, but a sexy film that realizes a serious idea stands apart from exploitation. More: with Breillat, the sex certifies the gravity. Yes, the couplings might have been less explicit, but the immediacy—we can almost scent body odors—becomes a verification. Breillat's film dramatizes the truth that human beings contain more than conventional ideals, which are abstractly calculated. True love in a man or woman does not always prohibit another true love. The film is not about Marigny's mere philandering: he is bound differently but deeply to two women.

This is hardly groundbreaking news about human nature, but Breillat's depiction of it is sensual and affecting. Her sensuality is focused on the people: the luxuriant and gorgeous costumes and settings of the time do not entrance her as they did Jacques Rivette in the comparable *Don't Touch the Axe*. To play Marigny, she has

found a young newcomer named Fu'ad Ait Aatou, good enough and handsome enough. Asia Argento, as Vellini, is a firebrand, a woman who is attractive even in non-seductive moments when she is angry or downcast or "off-stage." As Hermangarde, Roxane Mesquida, blonde of course, is softly ornamental.

Breillat, born in 1948, has been making films since 1975 and has taken knocks because of her subjects (not all of those knocks undeserved). I have seen only a few of her pictures, including *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*, but *The Last Mistress* seems to crown her method and intent—and, one must ultimately add, her courage.

Frozen River

27 August 2008

Yet another cinema term has become rubbery. "Independent film" can suggest an enterprise that was patched together as well as limited resources made possible, and this is indeed true of many good ones. But it is not always the case. *Frozen River* is an independent film, made (as far as I know) free of corporate control, and it is technically outstanding. It is a good deal more than that, but, to begin with, we need not concede that the filmmaker was doing her best in straitened circumstances.

Frozen River was written and directed by a young woman named Courtney Hunt, her first feature. She says, "I wrote this film after learning about [American] woman smugglers at the border of New York state and Canada who drive their cars across the frozen St. Lawrence River to make money to support their kids." But that was only the basic situation: Hunt is too good to be content with exposé or revelation. For a start, she has done wonderfully in the integration of people and place. The frozen river is the first shot. The beings and actions and habits of the people we see become the behavior of creatures along that river. Very soon we can smell the wool of their jackets.

Reed Morano, the cinematographer, has a subtle sense of light. Every tone, from the bright to the virtually black, is handily in his chromatic scale. Hunt has had Morano's help in keeping every shot either the rightly inevitable one for that moment or a variation of the expected that freshens—sometimes beautifies—the moment. We quickly sense that the director of this film has unusual perception, and that whatever the story and performances turn out to be, she will make the most of them.

The story is in fact not especially deep, but it nonetheless holds because of its telling. Ray is a woman in her forties whose husband has run out and left her with two sons, ages fifteen and five. She has a part-time job in a shop, but she is hard-pressed for money. A Mohawk woman called Lila—a Mohawk reservation is nearby—who also needs money for her children gets Ray involved in alien smuggling. They will be paid good money for stowing two people at a time in the trunk of Ray's car in Canada and bringing them across the river to New York. (When Ray, who drives, is fearful, Lila says that the cops won't bother her because she is white.) Money does come, and of course so do complications.

Our faith in the film, begun by its very making, is heightened by three performances. Misty Upham as Lila is both taciturn and eloquent in creating bitterness plus a grim bravado. The acting of Charlie McDermott as Ray's adolescent son is a tribute both to his talent and to Hunt's directing. But it is Melissa Leo who brings the picture fully to life. An experienced actress, lovely, sensitive, strong, Leo keeps verifying the film every moment that she is on screen. More of her, please, and of Hunt's exceptional directing.

The Pool

24 September 2008

Place, the place where a story is set, can figure powerfully in our encounter with a film—perhaps even more in our memory of it. Think of what Manhattan did for some of Sidney Lumet's films, or Arizona for some of John Ford's, or that Swedish island for some of Ingmar Bergman's. Surely the overwhelming example is what the desert did for David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*.

The Pool by Chris Smith raises the subject again, in an unusual way. Smith is an American who has made several features and who, a few years ago, worked with friends on a film in India. The experience kindled a hope to make a picture of his own there one day: thus, reversing matters, he chose his setting before he found his film. At last it came, and he went back—to the city that had especially taken him, Panjim in Goa.

Goa, on the west coast, is the smallest Indian state and has a unique history. Most of India, during the imperial era, was of course British, but for four and a half centuries Goa was a Portuguese colony. In 1961 the presence of a foreign entity in an otherwise liberated India was ended by an Indian takeover. For Smith, the combination of Portuguese vestiges with Goa today was a magnet. He had read a story by Randy Russell—set in America!—which seemed to him apt for transfer, so with Russell he wrote the screenplay, relocating it to Goa, then directed it and did the cinematography himself. The film unfolds small surprises as it goes; but the directing and camera work are fine from the start.

The center of the story is Venkatesh, an eighteen-year-old handyman-porter in a small hotel in Panjim who picks up extra cash from sidewalk peddling. His close pal is an eleven-year-old named Jhangir who comes from the same small town as Venkatesh; he works in a restaurant and helps out with his friend's peddling. Not far away is a luxe district where there is an estate with a large house and a large swimming pool. The place is empty. Whenever he can, Venkatesh climbs a mango tree outside the estate and gazes at the pool. He fantasizes about swimming in it, about living there, and is teased about his dreaming by Jhangir; still, he clings to his vision of a life not merely richer but somehow superior.

One day when he climbs the tree, he sees a mature man—obviously not a laborer—doing some gardening and a young girl reading by the pool. The man is the owner, Venkatesh rightly infers, who must be wealthy, because he doesn't actually live here: it's a spare residence. One day the youth follows the girl to a park and almost embarrassedly speaks to her. She, fairly cordial, is Ayesha, daughter of the older man, Nana. Soon Venkatesh also manages to approach Nana in a plant nursery and, by offering to help him, ingratiates himself. In a short while he is working for Nana part-time and becomes intimate enough to ask the older man why he keeps this estate though he lives in Bombay. Nana tells him that he won't sell the place because his son was drowned in the pool.

We might expect that the story has been built so that this lower-class youth can take the place of Nana's drowned son. (And, just possibly, there could be a future with Ayesha.) But Smith refuses the pattern. Venkatesh is not a movie hero. He is gaunt, graceless, illiterate. In time, he even tells of a semi-crazed six months in his past. Smith characterizes him as more or less the opposite of a gleaming social aspirant.

Nana, too, behaves in a counter-movie way. He is not, as we might expect, put off by the younger man's person or condition, and apparently he doesn't believe the craziness story. (Indeed, it may be only the youth's attempt to make himself interesting.) He urges Venkatesh to get an education and eventually offers him a gardening job with him in Bombay where he can also go to school.

Meanwhile, the youth and his younger pal have been hanging out with Ayesha. Like the heroine of a novel she is reading, she is a "messed-up" girl, affectless, somewhat inert—a condition not available to people of Venkatesh's class. When the three of them visit an old Portuguese fortress, the disparities between the two working-class kids and the upper-class girl seem heightened.

Venkatesh's decision about Nana's offer is delayed by a return to his hometown to see his mother and sisters. (In the family's attitude toward him, there is no hint that he is a recovered mental invalid.) When he returns to Panjim, he makes his decision about the job offer. Then he makes another decision. The end, involving Jhangir, brings still another decision.

Venkatesh is played by Venkatesh Chavan, Jhangir by Jhangir Badshah. Both are new actors who have been ingeniously directed by Smith. (Consider two facts: the dialogue is in Hindi, in which Smith is not fluent, and Hindi is not the young actors' native language. Out of this linguistic tangle come two seamless performances.) Smith obviously had an easier time with Nana Patekar, who is an eminence in Indian film and who has a commanding ease. Through Smith's cast and around them, his extensive talents shine.

So we have a film that is a kind of counter-film, which sets expectations in an environment that supports unexpected results. This is not to say that the streets and shops and parks and historical relics in Panjim shape the story: but the place and the society seem especially right for a story shorn of cinematic upholstery. It will be difficult to remember this film without remembering Goa. *The Pool* maintains that it is possible, even for a commonplace youth, to have a vision and to have the outcome leave him in some ways stronger. Yes, something like it could have happened in Brooklyn or Boise: but Goa is where, Smith persuades us, it had to happen.

August Evening

24 September 2008

Physically, the setting of *August Evening* is Texas—generally a verdant Texas, not longhorn country. The subject is a family of Mexicans: a mature father and mother, and grown children. (Most of the dialogue is in Spanish.) Intrinsically, however, the picture does more than deal with the family: it is *set* in the family. Though the picture travels around, it seems to take place in a special country: all the family members seem to have almost fierce citizenship in a country of their own. (That country has oddities and contradictions, as do all countries.)

Jaime, the patriarch, is about sixty. He works on a chicken farm. With him and his wife, Maria, lives Lupe, their widowed daughter-in-law. Maria dies early in the story: Jaime and Lupe, dear to each other, continue to live together. Jaime's job fizzles, and this odd pair—the graying man and his son's widow—have to move along as he looks for a job. Sometimes they live with one or another of Jaime's two other children, and there are family—"territorial"—frictions. Though these burn out, Jaime and Lupe move on, but are never out of touch with his children. He has trouble finding work. Sometimes he is reduced to hanging out on a street corner with other

men looking for a day's job. Lupe does some work in restaurants and teaches guitar to children.

Jaime, as he has done from the start, urges Lupe to remarry. She demurs. She simply is not keen on the idea of a new marriage, no matter how earnestly Jaime and others in the family encourage her. She feels safe in several ways with Jaime: also, he is close in her mind to her lost husband. At last a young butcher, Luis (a touch too evidently Mr. Right), comes along. He falls in love with Lupe, and matters progress—eventually—for Lupe and Luis and Jaime.

The details of the story are less engaging than the texture of the picture. Chris Eska, the debutant director, is clearly familiar with the film world's past. Like Mizoguchi and Antonioni, among many others, he enlists the environment of his film in his drama. For Eska, this is not a revel in landscape; although the cinematography by Yasu Tanida is gorgeous, it is a belief in physicality. Instances: the very last shots in the picture are of a kitchen, a light bulb, a roof. The imprint of these banal components of the day seems to suggest a commitment to the burden and privilege of existence, of just getting along in the world as it is. In an oblique way, this view helps the true setting of the picture—family ties and tugs. The characters as individuals and as members of the family, in all their flares of feeling, are constantly entailed with dailiness.

Two themes dominate. First, the Jaime-Lupe relationship, which is lovely, a father-daughter linkage that was created by them, not ordained in blood. Second, a family's need to deal with an aging parent, a common question couched here in affection and quandary. (Hence the title.) Both themes flow along, though the pace of the film is patient. We are held because, for two hours, we become members. With the same kitchens and light bulbs, we join this small nation.

Eska, who wrote and edited his film, appears to be at the beginning of a good career. (Note: he is the second extraordinary young American director to appear in a month, after Courtney Hunt of *Frozen River*.) He gets a touching performance from Veronica Loren as Lupe. But, as Chris Smith did with the youngsters in *The Pool*, Eska assists a semi-mysterious marvel. Pedro Castaneda, who plays Jaime, is not an actor, yet he is sturdy, true, screen-filling. This paradox of a non-actor's acting, familiar since the neorealist days in Italy—the leading man of De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* was not an actor—occurs when an acute director sees in a non-actor some qualities that he can help the camera to find. Notably, this phenomenon is one of the ways in which film has touched ideas about the very making of art.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona

8 October 2008

Two young American women, Vicky and Cristina, go to spend a summer in Barcelona. Dining one night in a restaurant, they see a good-looking man across the room. Soon the man, a Spanish painter fluent in English, comes over to their table, says that he is about to fly to Oviedo to look at a favorite sculpture there, and invites them to come with him. To their own surprise, they accept. He pilots his plane through a storm, lodges them in a splendid hotel, whirls them the next day to the sculpture and the sights of the city, and pursues Cristina amorously, but when she becomes indisposed, he transfers his attentions to Vicky. She says she likes guitar music: he knows a wonderful guitarist and takes her to hear him. Then they visit his father, a charming old poet. . . .

All this, we might easily think, sketches the first installment of a women's-magazine serial from the 1940s. But it is the start of Woody Allen's new film, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. Allen has merely added to this old-type fantasy a great deal of frankness and sex. For instance, when the painter, Juan Antonio, approaches the women in the restaurant, he proposes that in Oviedo, besides enjoying food and wine and art, they make love. In the course of the story, the sex happens with all three. But frank though the film is, it never entirely masks the basic romantic fabrication.

The storybook quality is fixed at the start by the voice-over (not Allen's voice). As the two young women ride in a taxi from the airport, the voice-over describes their characters, as one kind of writer might do before he puts his people in motion. Throughout the picture, though the voice-over serves its usual purpose by helping with transitions, it never quite loses its authorial tone.

Most of the story is set in Barcelona, with the inevitable bow to Gaudí. The horizontal doings of the two women and Juan Antonio are the center, but the most electric scenes are between Juan Antonio and his ex-wife, a painter named Maria Elena. These two are divorced in name only. They still love each other fiercely—in two senses. When, further along in the sexual merry-go-round, Cristina is actually living with Juan Antonio, he brings his ex-wife home one night after she has attempted suicide—possibly to draw his attention. So, for a time, Maria Elena is banished to the guest room while her beloved is in the bedroom with his new girlfriend. Of course Maria Elena soon reasserts her sexual prowess with Juan Antonio: later she beds his girlfriend and, not much later, both of them. Thus the magazine romance is updated.

Allen strains to complicate the plot. Vicky is engaged—to Doug, a New Yorker she will marry in the fall. While she is vibrating with Juan Antonio's zing, Doug phones to say that he would like to have a pre-marriage in romantic Barcelona before their standard American wedding in the fall. So Doug's presence, maneuvered undeftly by Allen, is added to the tangle.

What keeps the film highly watchable, despite its structure, is the quality of its making. The cast could hardly be better. Rebecca Hall is intelligent, direct, calmly vivid as Vicky, who is a student writing a thesis on Catalan literature. Scarlett Johansson is Cristina, vocationally adrift, a mite pathetic. Allen suddenly endows her with a gift for photography, which sets her course. Johansson moves engagingly through it all.

Allen has dared to write Maria Elena as our old acquaintance, the tempestuous Latin woman, but the cliché is exploded by Penélope Cruz, who seemingly never heard of it and knows only Maria Elena. If fireworks could be sexy, they would depict Cruz. Lavishing credibility on the whole tale, or at least making us wish it were true, is Javier Bardem as Juan Antonio. He is a powerhouse. His tactful confidence with the two young women is winning, and his love-hate relationship with Maria Elena really steams. (One of their ex-marital quarrels takes place in a street, and Allen makes us believe that they are a neighborhood fixture—no passerby pays attention.)

Sparing us his own presence in the film, Allen inferably uses Bardem as his stand-in. Many of us have long endured Allen's lovemaking on screen; now, his age mercifully precluding his own sex antics, he has instead written Juan Antonio and fulfilled the role with Bardem. In a recent amusing piece in *The New York Times*, Allen wrote: "If this were a scant few years ago, I would have played Javier's part." This joke, like many a joke, seems rooted in secrets.

Well, he supports his fantasy with his true talents. Much of the dialogue is good Allen stuff—neat, perceptive, often funny. His ability with actors has been

evident for years and has constantly grown. Likewise his fluency with the camera. From the opening pan of the picture through the compositions that emphasize and depict, Allen's directing is assured.

But the film is considerably schizoid. All the gifts of the cast and of Allen, all the little insights that are scattered along the way, are expended on a screenplay that is mostly contrivances. The best deviation from dreamy plotting is the finish. A conventional romance would have had a knitted-up ending. *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* simply untangles. Its most up-to-date aspect is that it does not formally conclude. The American women have some warm experiences; then they travel on. The same is true for the viewer.

Ballast

22 October 2008

Still another extraordinary new American director comes along—the third in just a few months. After Courtney Hunt with *Frozen River* and Chris Eska with *August Evening*, here is Lance Hammer with *Ballast*. Though these three directors have little in common stylistically, all three of their films deal with working-class people.

Hammer's film, which he also wrote and edited, is his first feature. Set in the Mississippi Delta, its three principal characters are black, yet the first person we see is white. He is a man called John who carefully enters the house of a neighbor, Lawrence, because Lawrence hasn't been seen for a bit and John is worried. He finds Lawrence sitting immobile; in the next room his twin brother Darius lies dead—of an overdose, we learn. Lawrence is now sufficiently roused to shoot himself but is only wounded. Taken to a hospital, he recovers.

The rest of the film explains the beginning and moves it forward. The story takes us to Darius's ex-mistress, Marlee; to her twelve-year-old son by him, James; and to Lawrence's involvement with them. Marlee, who is still simmering with anger at Darius's brusque treatment of her, has a menial job, which she loses. James, trying to help his mother, gets tangled for a time with drug dealers. In a shaky juvenile way, he even confronts Lawrence at gunpoint, attempting to get some of Darius's money that he thinks belongs to Marlee. Lawrence calms him. Still, Lawrence feels more and more involved in Darius's responsibility to Marlee and James, and is also himself attracted to Marlee. He offers her a job in his food store, and she accepts. In his slow, taciturn, even gentle way, Lawrence moves toward Marlee, but she rebuffs him. However, at the finish—the film takes place in summer—when James goes off to school, peace among these three seems possible.

The story has more verity than flash. No sliver of artifice or doubt ever intrudes: from the very start we are less viewers than witnesses. (Admittedly, occasional scraps of dialogue could be clearer.) In the press notes for the film—which actually seem to have been written by the man who made the picture—Hammer says he was primarily interested in the atmospheric effect. He realized that “some degree of narrative structure would be required” in order to give form to the work, but his main interest is “the tonal phenomenon.” His people are treasured, yet it is the very way that he looks at them, presents them, that is his chief concern. This does not mean showy virtuoso stylistics; but all through *Ballast* we are aware of our sense of accompaniment, moving along with Hammer as he watches and listens.

The physical shape of the film seems at first an oxymoron. *Ballast* is in wide-screen format, which is usually reserved for spectacle and lushness; yet the film verges on the visually bleak. The Delta country that we see is gaunt. The wide screen was used, it seems, to set the three principal characters in as much of their environment as possible, to make them inhabitants as well as people—remembering, while respecting them, that they are dots in a cosmos. And the picture was shot in available light, whatever light was naturally present. Strangely, this method, in the camera of Lol Crawley, does not make for *vérité*: it blends the realism with a hint of abstraction. (This effect is heightened by the almost complete absence of music.) Crowning the techniques of the film is Hammer's editing, which is like gentle weaving. As good editing always does, it leads our eyes where we want to look.

The temper of the film is so intensely personal that it is little surprise to learn how it was made. Not for the first time in film history, the principals were non-professional. More: the performers made their roles as if they were making their own garments. Hammer's statement needs quoting: "Though a script was created, it was not distributed [to the cast]. Scenario was discussed, then given form, in the course of a two-month rehearsal process. Actors contributed their own language to the rehearsals, dialogue evolved as the result." This method could easily have led nowhere. What is implicit here, beneath the reticence, is Hammer's talent. His choices of the non-actors, his relations with them, his skill at evocation, his pruning, his fixed view of what he was working toward—these were surely the mainstays under those two months.

So each of the three principals appears in a role substantially self-created. Jim-Myron Ross as James is infused with trembling sincerity. Michael J. Smith, Sr. is Lawrence, a role that is built on degrees of quiet. Lawrence is silent and brooding much of the time, and Hammer has found the depth in Smith that the silence portends. Marlee is the most emotionally demanding role, and Tarra Riggs vitalizes every measure of it. (Smith has since returned to his public service job in Mississippi. Ross is back in school. Only Riggs has gone on with acting.) The one prominent white person is the one professional actor, Johnny McPhail, who brushes in some helpful strokes as John.

At the last, *Ballast*, like every outstanding film, is something of a double experience. The drama holds us, yet we are equally taken by Hammer's vision and his ability to fulfill it. What kind of future will he have? We can keep our fingers crossed.

Tightly crossed, if he wants to continue his creative method with his casts. This approach to filmmaking, taking a non-actor and stripping him to essentials he may not even be aware of, has a long history—a history largely unwritten, as far as I know. (Robert Bresson is the arch-example in the field.) Two of the films discussed by me recently, *The Pool* and *August Evening*, used non-actors beautifully—amid professionals. Hammer puts his film almost wholly in the hands of three non-actors who worked out their own roles and found their capabilities. Possibly this recent resurgence of non-professional performance has to do with current worryings about the term "reality"; perhaps it is because of so crass a reason as production budget; perhaps it is a dislike of actorishness. (Bresson once threatened to leave a rehearsal for one of his films if his cast didn't stop acting.) As one who loves acting—even, to some degree, actorishness—and who owes some of his cherished experiences in art to acting, I am awestruck by what can often be achieved with this heterodox approach. Part of this success is obviously possible because film acting can be done in bits, as against sustained performance on stage. But much of it may be because the screen gives each member of the audience an additional eye—the camera.

One Day You'll Understand

19 November 2008

Jeanne Moreau has reigned in French films since 1950, sensual, brainy, wryly dangerous, free. She was a woman whom men sometimes didn't dare to fantasize about, and for some women she figured as an agent of reprisal. All these qualities were heightened by her talent and technique. (Before she entered films, she was schooled in the theater, an ingénue at the Comédie Française.) But time has had its way with Jeanne Moreau, too, and now she appears as a grandmother. In fact, a Jewish grandmother.

The film, *One Day You'll Understand*, has a story by Jérôme Clément and Dan Franck, from a novel by Clément. Amos Gitai, the renowned Israeli director who spent ten years in France and then went home to Haifa, returned to France to make this film. The subject is the deepening awareness in latter-day French people of Jewish descent about what happened under the German occupation. This was also the subject of Claude Miller's *A Secret*, but that film was mostly about the discovery of past facts. Gitai's film does some factual discovering, too, but essentially it is about darkness—not the facts of evil themselves so much as the shadows that some of us leave on discomfiting facts in order to get through our lives. Of course (hence this film) there is a counter-urge to know—the burrowing belief that one's life is askew unless unwelcome facts are brought to mind. The darkness is then explored.

Darkness, literally, is a key visual element in Gitai's film, as used through the camera of Caroline Champetier. In the very first sequence, a man, touched with shadow, moves through the Shoah Memorial in Paris. (On the soundtrack there is gentle music of Jewish flavor.) On the Wall of Names, in somewhat less shadow, the man finds the name he is looking for. Thus, sheerly with light and shadow, Gitai hints at his theme.

The man is Victor Bastien (intensely played by Hippolyte Girardot), who has been troubled about his origins for some time—ever since he saw the televised broadcasts of Klaus Barbie's trial in 1987 twenty years earlier. Most of the film continues back in that year, when Barbie's trial was on television. Victor, married and with two children, is aware of his mother's Jewish background but has hardly delved into it. He has clearly wanted the past to be past. But the Barbie business unsettles him. He has a sister, Tania, who was baptized Catholic and who is equally unsettled by the Barbie atmosphere. They look through family papers and discover a letter that their father wrote during the occupation to prove his Aryan descent. Disturbed, Victor goes to their mother, Rivka (Moreau), for more information.

Rivka, smartly dressed and heavily accessorized, is hardly an old yenta in a babushka. Apparently she has become the chic woman that she is, a collector of *objets d'art*, as a kind of triumph over the past. Rivka doesn't tell Victor as much as he wants to know about her parents, Jews who died in Auschwitz. So, with his children (in their late teens), Victor visits the village, the very hotel, where his grandparents hid during the war and where they were arrested by the Germans. The hotel keeper recalls the arrest, and Gitai incises it with a succinct flashback. We don't see the grandparents themselves. We see boots on gravel and police dogs, we hear shots.

In time, Rivka, whose health is failing, comes to reveal matters secreted under her sophistication. On Yom Kippur she is in a synagogue with her grandchildren. Out of her pocketbook she takes the yellow star that she once wore and slips it to her grandson. The oppressive badge of identity becomes sacred.

Near the end of the film, once again in the present day, Victor, now aware of where he comes from, now a more complete if more burdened man, visits a government office where compensation is being paid to the French Jews who were deported, or to their descendants. As the clerk ticks off the checklist of Victor's family's possessions, past lives are transmuted into records.

For his last shot Gitai views Paris at night, a slow pan from the Eiffel Tower over the light-flecked city. It furthers his theme of light persisting against darkness. Throughout the film he maintains this dark-light tension, often letting the camera glide through scenes rather than editing, to preserve this tension. So *One Day You'll Understand* is not exclusively a picture about the Holocaust. It is about a contradiction: human discomfort with some truths and human hunger for them. The instance here is acknowledgment of the fate of French Jews under the German occupation. The story, as film stories go, is simple: the implications are not.

Moreau's role is not large, but it is the linchpin, connecting shadow and light. She makes Rivka a woman whose idea of nobility is to enclose troublesome issues with elegance. As usual, she doesn't merely take the role, she possesses it. As usual, she brings to it not only her talent but her career. As usual, she makes her performance seem the reason why she has done everything else up to now.

Some years ago I spent an hour with Moreau in her trailer at a film location just outside Paris. (Her English is fluent; her mother was English.) Her day's work was finished, and she was relaxed. I asked her how the film was going, how she liked working with this director, Jean-Louis Richard. She said that it was going well enough and that she couldn't work well with a director unless she had slept with him. I congratulated Monsieur Richard. Moreau smiled and said that they had once been married and had a fifteen-year-old son together.

I turned to the subject of acting, asked questions, took notes. Her answers still resonate. Here are some of them:

"On stage one feels extroverted, selfish. In films one feels personal, private."

"Acting is more difficult for the screen because it deals with mysteries of self and feeling that must be revealed. Rehearsal in the theater is the reverse. It is like a hidden war—fighting against yourself. A good director in the theater is interested in what you hide. Hiding is less easy in films."

"Actors are very lazy. They think they are doing their best when it's easiest for them."

"I love *Jules and Jim*. I have not seen *La Notte*."

"Antonioni creates an atmosphere on the set. He doesn't direct in detail. He only wants to 'see what shows.' Godard, on the other hand, takes actors from A to B, and so on. He supplied the technique for [Jean-Paul] Belmondo, who has only instincts."

"I would like to make films with Bergman and Fritz Lang. I almost did one with Bergman, but he decided he couldn't work outside Sweden. He wants me to learn Swedish."

She didn't. Nor did she work with Lang. (The film she was making at the moment was *Mata Hari*, which was not released in the United States.) *La Notte*, which she had never seen, is for many of us a masterwork, due in part to her performance.

A Christmas Tale

24 December 2008

Every director needs at least some courage, but Arnaud Desplechin has quite a lot. With his new film, *A Christmas Tale*, he bravely took on a trite form, hoping that he could vitalize it. He succeeds. He also gave the picture a title that risks the corny, apparently sure that it would come to seem ironic. Eventually it even transcends irony.

Born in Roubaix, an industrial city in northern France, Desplechin, with co-author Emmanuel Bourdieu, sets his story there. The pattern is familiar: a large family gathers—in this case for the holiday, but in other films it has been for a birthday or an anniversary—and, in the course of time and drink, the seemingly merry group splits into hates and spites and jealousies. Desplechin varies the pattern from the start: he tells us very early that this group has troubles. The daughter of the family, a playwright named Elizabeth, hates one of her brothers, Henri, a drifter, because of a quarrel five years ago. She has not spoken to him in those five years. Further, we learn early that Elizabeth's sixteen-year-old son, Paul, quiet, dreamy, is schizophrenic. To cap these unfestive preliminaries there is some news about the matriarch, Junon. She has just been diagnosed with leukemia, the illness that killed her infant son many years ago, and she needs a transfusion of bone marrow. Shaded by all these opening matters, the title soon looks a bit guileful.

Yet the film encloses these anti-mistletoe facts in its holiday shape. The family gathering includes mother, father, two sons and a daughter, a nephew, and others. This Christmas is never jolly, but the aura of celebration affects behavior. For instance, Simon, Junon's nephew, has long been silently in love with Sylvia, his cousin's wife, and during the holiday—in a way because of it—we see that silence breached. Then the doctors discover that two of the family have the right type of bone marrow for Junon, troublesome Henri and reticent Paul. Along with the ordinary gift-giving, we see the decision made about the donor of this rather extraordinary present.

Desplechin holds his film in a context formed of two factors. First, this family, woes and all, very soon takes us in. We do not observe—we enter. Their troubles affect us as if we were participants: these people are so authentic that it would almost be rude to resist. The second factor derives from their immediacy: the family's general view of life—a basically tacit philosophy. It is manifested first by Junon, when she learns of her condition. Here is a woman who is told that she is close to death, but she is neither distraught nor panicky nor desperate. She accepts the news not because she relies on a donor in her family—she doesn't yet know of one. She simply accepts it. Though she never articulates her view, it clearly suffuses her—a sense that life consists of whatever happens to you, nothing more, nothing less. (A Danish prince said, "The readiness is all.") Her behavior sets the tone for a film that wraps troubled people in a sort of composure.

Junon is played by Catherine Deneuve, who is just about old enough to convince as a matriarch but is exactly right for the calm fatalism of the role. The death of her first child decades ago from the disease that now threatens her has apparently

tempered her mind and spirit to acceptance, almost as if a pattern were being fulfilled. Most of the others breathe the same air of acceptance about themselves. Her husband, Abel, played by the endearingly homely Jean-Paul Roussillon, is of course concerned about Junon but shares her dignity in the face of the imponderable. Mathieu Amalric's unruly but appealing Henri bases his pococurantism on a shrug in the face of existence. There is one exception to the general mood. Sylvia—played affectingly by Chiara Mastroianni, daughter of Catherine Deneuve and the late great Marcello—has her affair with her husband's cousin as a kind of protest against the idea of acceptance.

At one point in the film, Henri, somewhat bewildered but amused at his bewilderment, says, "We're all in the middle of a myth, and I don't know what the myth is." Here is Desplechin's atmospherics, a belief that the real exists within the perimeter of the abstract. The holiday party itself is part of the mythology, not through religion but through the shaping of pattern, almost peripheral pattern. This is more than irony. It is, in a large sense, enclosure—in myth that we are conscious of from time to time but that, as Henri says, we do not understand. (As if to confirm his percept, in the last moments of this veristic film comes an outright allusion to the mythic: a brief quotation from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a snatch of Mendelssohn's music.)

Desplechin delves into these complexities simply by focusing on his people. (Literally, too: that focus includes occasional iris shots for emphasis. Not incidentally, Desplechin was once a cinematographer.) Patently he thinks that the subtlest way to penetrate states of mind is through fidelity to dailiness, to character. He has skill, patience, empathy, and insight; quickened by the holiday occasion, they make the title of his film ultimately, if unconventionally, right.

Silent Light

4 February 2009

Yet again, and again impressive, comes a film with a nonprofessional cast. Like such recent pictures as *Ballast*, *The Pool*, and *August Evening*, all of which gloried in film's power to transform sincerity into art, *Silent Light* presents people who have not been actors but who have committed themselves with their entire beings. But *Silent Light* is markedly different from comparable films. Almost all these people are Mennonites, most of whom live in Mexico.

Germanic in origin and still German-speaking, the people of this Protestant sect descend from forebears who emigrated to Canada in 1873 and then, because of prejudice against them during and after World War I, moved to Mexico in 1922. Almost 100,000 Mennonites now form communities in Mexico, and *Silent Light* is set in one of them. They can speak Spanish, of course, but amongst themselves they speak Plautdietsch, a German dialect. *Silent Light* has double subtitles. Below the picture is the English translation for us; above it is the Spanish version for Mexicans. This purely technical arrangement has a thematic effect: it affirms that these lives are ensconced—indeed, preserved—within other cultures.

The director, Carlos Reygadas, is a Mexican who has already attracted attention with two films, unseen by me, that were in reported ways sensational. Nothing could be less true of *Silent Light*. Here Reygadas dwells in a tiny universe that wants to keep its particularity, in its ethos even more than its social customs.

Religion is of course the base of that ethos, but only at the end does it envelop the story.

What we see first is darkness, and we hear nothing. Then faintly we hear birds and a cow or two, and light begins to seep over the horizon as the sun rises. Soon, with great trees as warders, daylight brings farmland alive. Alexis Zabe's cinematography is exquisite throughout, but this sequence is virtuosic. I can't remember a previous sunrise to start a film other than David Watkin's work in *Catch-22* in 1970, a comparison more fitting than it might seem at first. In the earlier film the serenity of nature arrives to reveal an Air Force base, not exactly a locus of peace. In *Silent Light* the contrast is much smaller, but for the people involved, it is equally grave. The majesty of the sun discloses family troubles.

In the comfortable kitchen of his farmhouse, Johan is having breakfast with his wife Esther and their six children. A clock ticks. Even if the viewer knows nothing of the religious ambience of the place, this sequence, realistic as it is, seems somewhat abstract compared with other family breakfasts. Both the parents and the children behave as if they were responsible to some authority for their behavior, and not just because grace is said.

Yet through this nearly ritualized meal a tension seeps. When the children leave, Esther stands silently beside Johan for a moment and kisses him before she goes. He sits, thoughtful, troubled. He climbs on a chair and stops the clock—as if to halt a persistence. Then he goes about his farm work. He meets a friend, who knows and talks about what is troubling Johan. The farmer has fallen in love with another woman, Marianne, who is about his age, unmarried. He is as burdened as moved by this love. His friend gives him sympathy, but not in any sly winking way. Johan's burden is made even heavier because Esther knows, too, and, at least as of now, feels sympathy for her husband as much as anything else.

We soon meet Johan's father, a preacher, who has earlier recognized his son's condition. The father tries to console Johan by admitting that he went through a similar crisis when he was young. He recognizes in Johan the manner in which torments of feeling are constrained—painfully but, perhaps, hopefully—by the patterns of this community's life.

The story follows the troubles of Johan's situation, but in nothing like conventional triangle tales. Largely the semi-abstract sense continues: a film that is absolutely veristic in look moves before us as if it were being shown to us in distilled form. This is emphasized when at one point Johan and family visit a town center and the children watch somebody's television. The telecast pop singer's cheap wailing and the audience's rapture are like gashes in the film's texture—a vivid comment on facile emotion in the world outside and the temper of this community, where deep feelings are matters to be reckoned with deeply.

We see one sexual encounter, with minimal detail, between Johan and Marianne, who is as appealing and simple as Esther. She then tells him that, though she has invited this bedding, it must be their last. This is of no help to his internal roiling.

Internal it is. Only toward the end of the film do any of the actors really show strong feelings. Up to then we simply believe them. In fact, the film holds us precisely because the drama is both present and paradoxically private. Toward the end, however, both Marianne and especially Esther burst with feeling. This irruption leads to something that, in textural terms, is shocking.

Throughout the film, the texture suggests Reygadas's reverence for past film art. For instance, the ticking clock reminds us of Bergman; the use of environment to

help realize the theme is sheer Bresson. Then, near the end, comes a startling homage to Dreyer. Reygadas calls up a miracle. Manifestly this idea was drawn from the end of Dreyer's *Ordet*, where a comparable miracle occurs. But from the start *Ordet* is explicitly about religion, and a miracle seems the apt conclusion. In *Silent Light* religion has always been implicit. The miracle here seems summoned.

Still, everything until then is so uncannily fine that we feel it nearly out of order, ungrateful, to cavil. The film rests firmly on Reygadas's evocation of bewildered quiet in Cornelio Wall Fehr (Johan) and Miriam Toews (Esther) and Maria Pankratz (Marianne). This result implies a communion between the director and his people that is in itself moving. *Silent Light* doesn't leave the viewer harrowed, as some great films on marital troubles have done. Yet it seems made of truth. Even that last shift of temper, the miracle, can ultimately be accepted almost as a concession to the characters' needs.

A slow dusk concludes this film that began with a slow dawn. Between the two daily phenomena, we have witnessed something like a modern version of a medieval mystery play. It puts before us the piercing of order by desire, a species of mortal accident that is shaking and terrible but that can clarify the very idea of order.

Everlasting Moments

1 April 2009

The best films I know by the greatly gifted Jan Troell, who is Swedish, are set in the Scandinavian past. *Here's Your Life* takes place in Sweden during World War I; *The Emigrants* and *The New Land* form a diptych about nineteenth-century Swedish immigrants; *Hamsun* is of course about the Norwegian writer who died in 1952. Merely to mention those films is to wish that every viewer knew them.

Now, after some years of absence—at least from the United States—here is Troell again with his latest visit to the past. *Everlasting Moments* takes place in the decade beginning in 1907, is set mostly in Malmö in southern Sweden, and is once again distinguished by this director's typical combination of loveliness and grit. The screenplay, by Troell and two others, focuses on a stratified society in which the working class knows its place but is beginning to know more.

One of the means through which this change arrives is especially congruent here. That means is photography. A camera figures in Troell's story and becomes a catalyst. Implicit in this change is a tremendous historical truth: the camera revised the scale of human values. Until it was invented, the chief way of recording faces, of preserving and sharing an individual's personal qualities, was a portrait done by an artist, and the subjects were preponderantly people of the upper classes. The camera, in a relatively short time, broke that exclusivity. Now every face was a possible subject. The porter, the mechanic, the laundry woman now shared the previous privilege of princes. Any face could become a memento of humanity. Can this huge change in the scale of individual importance have had no effect on society? Can it be sheer accident that photography arrived coincidentally with the nineteenth century's irruption in social and political turbulence?

Maria Larsson is a working-class bride who has won a camera in a lottery. She forgets about it as she plunges into a hectic life of housekeeping and mothering. (Eventually she has seven children.) Her husband, Sigfrid, is a husky dock laborer who is often brought home drunk and whose womanizing is no secret. Evidently his behavior is one kind of pattern in their world: Maria dislikes but accepts it in him as

part of a working man's life. She accepts, too, his beating of her, which is apparently another part of her predetermined lot. Oddly, the children accept it, too. When Sigfrid is walloping Maria, they are frightened, but in a few minutes he is calmed and is hugging the kids whom he adores, and they respond affectionately.

Maria has no thought of leaving Sigfrid. Presumably she knows many other wives in similar situations. But one day she happens to come across that camera. Something more than curiosity takes hold. Subtly but persistently, she senses that if she follows it, she may open doors.

A Danish man named Pedersen runs a photography studio and shop in Malmö. Maria visits with her camera to learn how to use it, and slowly she and Pedersen become friends. There is no suggestion of an affair in the weeks to come, but as she learns more about the camera, there is a meeting of spirits. Maria is entering an enlarged world.

While this camera relationship is growing, Sigfrid is drafted into the army—World War I is simmering—but he never even gets a uniform. Sweden is neutral. He does, however, meet a political radical whom he likes but whose ideas do not win him. Sigfrid gives this radical the teasing nickname of the man's favorite author, Kropotkin. Sigfrid's brush with radicalism might have done for him what the camera did for Maria: altered his view of himself and his definition of fate. But it doesn't seriously affect him.

When Sigfrid discovers Maria's interest in photography and a photographer, he reacts as expected. After his outburst, her older children counsel her to leave him and join Pedersen, who is about to return to Denmark. Other factors enter. Her story ends with a self-portrait.

Troell's screenplay, as has often been the case with him, exists for the fullness of its texture, not for dramatic growth and resolution. We spend two hours-plus in a thoroughly plumbed environment, with its complications of sex, family love, accustomed stratification, possible social change. Conditioned as we are by expectations of form, we anticipate—perhaps unawares—certain developments. But a peculiar truth holds about a Troell film: it is not necessarily a cumulative drama with an organic resolution. Certainly Troell has a sense of the dramatic moment, but he sees it as a moment in a life that has other moments before and after—not as an element in a growing structure. Principally, with a Troell film, the viewer relishes some richly comprehended characters, marvelously presented. Ingmar Bergman, master dramatist though he was, once said that his chief interest in filmmaking was the human face. No wonder he admired this man.

Troell began as a cinematographer, and he has shot most of his films (including most of this one). In a film world where fine cinematography is now common, he is still exceptional. Light, light in itself, he obviously treats as one of his characters. (A passing instance: a shot of a dark street with a street lamp—a chiaroscuro incident—is unforgettable.) His sense of color is acute. In *Everlasting Moments*, we never feel that he is manipulating visually, yet we can see, especially in the scenes in the Larsson home, that the realism is keyed to a suggestion of sepia—which suggests the atmosphere of the place.

The three leading actors give us completed roles. Mikael Persbrandt makes Sigfrid a man who believes that his life of heavy labor and wife-beating and child-hugging, of drinking and whoring, is what heaven has assigned him. Jesper Christensen as the photographer is gentleness incarnate yet with no tick of sentimentality. Maria Heiskanen as Maria takes us along on her modest but exciting voyage of self-discovery. She enables us to imagine—we want to imagine—what she

is not always displaying. She is a fitting actress for a director whose primary interest is communion.

Hunger

15 April 2009

Steve McQueen is a well-known British artist who is becoming a well-known filmmaker. *Hunger*, his first feature film, is less a promising work than a fulfillment. It has nothing to do with Knut Hamsun's famous novel of the same title (beautifully filmed in 1966). It deals with the Irish Troubles, specifically the hunger strike in a Northern Ireland prison led by Bobby Sands in 1981, a strike that led to his death and nine others.

The Troubles, including the Sands story, have been well treated in film—in *Some Mother's Son*, *Bloody Sunday*, and *In the Name of the Father*. But McQueen's film is not just one more. His film is certainly political in context, but it is not centrally about politics. It is, as he says, "an abstraction of what it is to die for a cause." This is a different and even more awesome subject, not topical but timeless.

The previous films that McQueen has done were, I gather, *objets d'art*, made for museums and galleries. This is his first film made with actors. He needed a writer, and he did not want an experienced screenwriter because, he says, they tell an audience too much. He engaged an Irish playwright named Enda Walsh to collaborate with him, and after much research and interviewing, they created a script unlike any I know. It is in three distinct parts. The first part and the third have almost no dialogue. The second part is a conversation between two men. Odd though the structure is, it comes to seem inevitable for this film—thus a proof of McQueen's unusual vision.

Bobby Sands does not appear in the first part. That section, about forty minutes long, concentrates on a guard in Sands' prison. McQueen says, in an interview in the latest *Cineaste*, that he had read somewhere that Godard had said the only way to film the Holocaust is through the eyes of a guard. With these Irish prisoners, McQueen follows the comment in the opening part. *Hunger* begins in the home of a guard named Lohan, washing up in the morning, having breakfast, then leaving for work after he looks under his car for bombs. In the course of the day he goes through some rote procedures, which include office routines and the beating of naked prisoners in a corridor gauntlet. Between tasks, we sometimes see Lohan alone, smoking, shaking. Subsequently he goes to a nursing home to visit an older woman, his mother presumably. She has been rendered mute and unresponsive by a stroke, so she cannot respond to what happens to Lohan right in front of her.

The second part brings in Sands, but in an unusual way. In a medium shot, we see him and a priest on opposite sides of a plain table in an otherwise deserted visitors' room in the prison. They are backlit by a window in the far wall. They smoke. (The priest provides the cigarettes.) They speak together, says McQueen, for seventeen and a half minutes—one shot, fixed, gratifying—before we cut to close-ups of Sands and the priest. It is not the novelty of the idea that fascinates—introducing the main character well along in the film and doing it in a fixed double shot. By the time we get there, McQueen has convinced us that any conventional procedure would be unworthy.

His unique method enhances what these men say. The priest, a mature man, begins with what he later calls "priests' small talk," asking Sands about another priest whom they both know and indulging in some unpriestly professional jealousy.

(Expletives in both men are not forced but are not forsaken.) Sands knows that this talk is only the warm-up, but he takes it as such, and when they come to their real subject, he is quietly ready and willing. He is going on a hunger strike to protest the order to wear prison garb. (In the first part, we have already seen this refusal in other prisoners.) He holds that he and his friends are not criminals and should be treated as prisoners of war. Stripped to the few possibilities of protest in prison, he makes this clothing matter a major issue. It is worth, he believes, his life.

He speaks simply about this belief—in essence a belief that life must be lived to a purpose. This is the purpose that has been afforded him here, to give his life for a principle, a freedom, that may help to enrich life after he has left it. The priest counters often with the church's proscription of suicide and, in Sands's terms, with questionings of his belief. The priest fails. We feel that, disappointed though he is, he admires Sands. The only way he can show it is to leave Sands the pack of cigarettes.

Part Three distills into a half-hour or so the sixty-six days of Sands's course into death. As in the first part, the dialogue is sparse. We see his physical decline with some detail, just enough. We see that at every mealtime he is brought a tray of food that he doesn't touch. There is no force-feeding. His parents visit during these days, always taciturn, always accepting of his decision. They even bring his burial clothes. A closing credit tells us that, during his strike, Sands was elected to Parliament by Fermanagh and South Tyrone in Northern Ireland. We are not told that, all through the strike, his face was on Irish television every day with the number of the day.

In addition to the unique frame of the whole film, the framing of every shot—with Sean Bobbitt at the camera—shows an eye for the relation of detail to major elements. The pace of events is not so much slow as undisturbed. (A number of recent films by independent directors have been paced in opposition to the time-span rush of the present day. Some filmmakers are resisting the supposedly universal injunction to feed the eye at the expense of everything else.) "I had never worked with actors before, but I thought it best to be truthful with them and I think they found that quite shocking," McQueen says. Shocked or otherwise, the three principals embody what McQueen presumably was after in their characters, Stuart Graham as Lohan, Liam Cunningham as the priest, and Michael Fassbender—simple, without pretentious glow—as Sands. The good news: with McQueen's first feature, an open, fine, inquiring artist has joined the film world.

Treeless Mountain

20 May 2009

Children deepen one of the mysteries in film's being. It is mysterious enough that, since film's beginning, non-professional adults have given valuable film performances. Still, one can spin social and cultural explanations for this astonishment. But what about the performances by small children, children who were not child stars and who convinced millions? The list is too long to nibble at.

How can we explain them? How can we understand the mystery?

Some technical facts apply to children as well as adults. Film acting, unlike theater acting, is done in small bits, with the director unseen but present. Those bits can be repeated until—sometimes by accident, yet often by patent understanding—they are made to fit the mosaic of the whole. This process is often helpful for adults, and surely is even more so for children. But the child cannot have an adult's cognizance of film's place in the world or any real concept of fame or riches. He is

probably out to please—the parent who is on the sidelines, the director who is coddling him. Yet, through all these conditions, he can make beauty. How? Why? Explanations, psychological or otherwise, go only so far until they meet mystery. Something happens beyond explanation. Even in professional adults, talent is ultimately inexplicable. A child's ability—not exactly talent—to reproduce truth is even more miraculous.

The mystery flowers again in a film from South Korea called *Treeless Mountain*. The two leading characters are sisters, Jin and Bin, who are six and four. They are credible from our first glimpse, but they do not give what we can sensibly call performances. The writer-director—So Yong Kim, a young South Korean woman who has made one previous feature—has provided places for the sisters to dawdle, to play, to cry, and to laugh: they, seemingly, do the rest. Just by being there. The story that Kim has written for them is full enough so that we can't say there is none, but essentially the picture merely provides reasons for us to look at them. The girls live in three different homes in the course of the film, and Kim simply lets those girls move and speak as much as possible in those three places. What enchants in this film is not only the way they act or react in emotional scenes: the pleasure is simply to be with two captivating little girls in all kinds of moments.

Bin and Jin live in Seoul with their mother, who has been abandoned by their father. She cares for them, but her mind is mostly on her husband. Very soon she takes her daughters to their aunt, who lives in a small dingy town, and leaves them there so that she can go looking for him. She asks Bin and Jin to put any small coins they get into a piggy bank they have, and she will return when it is full.

Big Aunt, as the girls call her, is helpful at first, but soon, without ever being cruel—this is not *Oliver Twist*—she treats them offhandedly. And it doesn't help that she drinks. During their stay with their aunt, the girls do the bit of make-believe from which the title derives. On a pile of rubble near where they live, they stick a dead limb of a tree. It is the one symbol in the picture, this attempt to start life in barrenness, and it looks less and less necessary as the picture goes on.

Before long, the piggy bank fills up and their mother has not returned. Big Aunt can't deal with the girls any more and takes them to their grandparents, who live on a farm. Their grandmother embraces them and begins to teach them country ways of living. (We never see their grandfather, though we hear him once.) Nothing extraordinary happens. In time the girls get a loving letter from their mother delaying her return. Another use is found for the full piggy bank.

Kim tells us, in press material, that the girls did not know the content of each scene until they were about to do it. (They hadn't read the script, of course!) She spoke to them while they were actually shooting the scenes, reminding them, leading them, and she says that the most challenging part of the post-production work was editing her voice out of all the sound tracks.

But this only makes the girls all the more astonishing, because they never obey. They never seem to be doing what someone asked them to do. Whatever they say, wherever they move, it always seems to be something that just occurred to them. And all their responses to others, as often seems the case with small children, seem to interrupt thoughts of their own, which have been focused on a stick or a toy. They play with the small son of a neighbor of Big Aunt, they investigate grasshoppers with some boys, but they always seem to be primarily concerned with inner worlds of which our world is an interruption.

The girls' names are Hee Yeon Kim and Song Hee Kim (not actual sisters), but we may never see them again. If so, they join the multitude of children now

forgotten who have mysteriously enriched film's past. I am not a parent, but I was jealous of their fathers for eighty-nine minutes. So Yong Kim has brought these girls to us with no trace of kiddy cuddle, with understanding and respect, and with a wonder that she enables us to share.

The Window

3 June 2009

An Argentinean film called *The Window* derives from a predecessor. Carlos Sorin, who has written and directed six films, says that he saw Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* forty years ago and that, in effect, he has been moving toward his own version of that masterpiece ever since. He, I am sure, would be quick to say that he has not matched Bergman. Still, Sorin's long love has some rewards for us.

Like the Bergman work, *The Window* is about an old man and it all takes place in one day. We are in the large country house of an eighty-year-old successful author, Don Antonio. He is unwell. He lies in bed through much of the day, an intravenous nib in his arm, while two devoted maids take care of him. Chatter between servants, one of the most venerable devices in drama, supplies the information that we need. Don Antonio's son is coming today. The son, a well-known pianist, long ago quarreled with his father, and they are about to make up. So we look forward to a family drama that, to judge by the deftness of the opening moments, we want to watch.

The drama never comes—not to any sizable degree. Sorin has other purposes. Some things do happen, but that is hardly a definition of drama. Here are some of the things that happen. The film opens with a dream in which the old man thinks he hears people dancing downstairs and a lovely girl kisses him. His two maids, with their daily routine, come in and bring him back to the present. Don Antonio's doctor, an old friend, arrives to examine him, which he does in a manner that tells us what the doctor thinks without his saying anything. The patient gives his doctor a copy of a Borges first edition that Borges inscribed encouragingly to this author long ago. Don Antonio hopes that he hasn't let Borges down, and the doctor reassures him.

When Don Antonio is left alone, strictly against orders he gets out of bed clutching his infusion jar, finds his jacket and panama hat, and actually goes for a walk outside. It is as if he wanted to see his fields once more, just as he wants to see his son. In the middle of a field he even pees, possibly in pride. But his strength soon falters, and he collapses. Some young people—oh, how young they look—who are touring the countryside come along, and they summon aid.

After Don Antonio is back in bed, his son arrives with his thirtyish wife. The reunion is warm enough—just. The son opens a bottle of champagne that his father has been treasuring for this occasion. It is flat. Don Antonio laughs. They all laugh. The son goes downstairs with the maids, and the wife is left with Don Antonio. Soon the old man asks quietly, "Are they dancing downstairs?" The wife, moved, understands that a dream is happening. She leans forward to kiss him, and in that very last moment—a Bergman touch—we see her in a dress of bygone days.

I have detailed the story because there are so few details. *The Window* screenplay is not dramatic in an orthodox way, or (like Bergman's) a unique one. It is a visit to several lives. This is an idea that appeals to some imaginative filmmakers. A recent instance, the South Korean film *Treeless Mountain*, has been criticized for having no developed story. To me, that is like criticizing a string quartet for having no

brass. That film was made so that we could spend some time with two little girls. Sorin made his film from—his words in a press statement—“a very weak story in which apparently not very much happened, but I hoped that many things might happen in the spectator’s mind.” This approach seems to me daring and interesting. The trouble is that not quite enough happens in the spectator’s mind.

Much is admirable. Julian Apezteguia’s camera leads us into sheer pleasantness. (We are soon tickled by the fact that Don Antonio’s bed, in this large well-furnished house, is a plain iron bedstead.) Lesser characters, like the young people who help Don Antonio in the field, like the son’s wife, are handled with casual verity. But the two most important people are limitedly characterized. The son is not an individual. Don Antonio is recognizable but insufficiently deep. He is played by Antonio Larreta who has done as much writing and directing—for theater and film—as acting. We can suspect that Sorin knows Larreta well and relied on the richness of the man himself to fulfill the role without having to write it all out for him. This fulfillment doesn’t quite happen. So we come away with respect for Sorin’s intent, affection for much of what he has done, and a wish that we had been too overwhelmed to put our response so calmly.

Summer Hours

17 June 2009

The French writer-director Olivier Assayas, experienced and versatile, is now defiant. He certainly knows that one of the most frequently recurrent film themes is social change. Still, he bravely engages this familiar theme in his new film, *Summer Hours*. Well, we can be glad that he did. It was said of Arturo Toscanini that when he conducted a familiar piece—say, Beethoven’s Fifth—he made it a world premiere. I burden Assayas with this large Toscanini comparison because *Summer Hours* makes us forget that we have been here before. The idea seems fresh.

Some children and adolescents come trooping through a field toward a large house. They are the grandchildren of Hélène Berthier, who is seventy-five. In the house, besides Hélène, are her son Frédéric (with wife), his younger brother Jérémie (with wife), and his sister Adrienne. This house was once the home of a famous painter, Hélène’s uncle. The extraordinary furnishings, including two Corot canvases, were the uncle’s acquisitions.

Hélène is a poised woman, conscious of both her age and her responsibility for the lovely things in this house. She tells Frédéric that the Musée d’Orsay has already shown interest in the Corots and some of the furniture, which was made by masters. She wants him to be careful of the house and these things after she is gone. Frédéric of course tells her that it is too soon for her to worry about such matters, and she of course dies within a few months.

Most of the film is set in Paris apartments: houses belong in the country, in the past of these people. The heirs have to decide what to do with the legacy that is coming their way, including the house. Frédéric is an economist in Paris; Jérémie is a business man who works in China; Adrienne, unmarried, is a designer who works in New York. One of Assayas’s niceties is that these conversations are not material squabbles: they are sharp but smooth dramatizations of changes toward family, toward continuances—toward the family’s house, for prime instance. The tugs of contemporary life, in money and in social patterns, are deployed by Assayas for

insights and abutments. No one is right or wrong: everyone comes out right but a bit bruised.

Pertinent as it all is, we might begin to feel that this film about social change is not paying enough attention to changes for younger people. That kind of change then implodes. Sylvie, Frédéric's teenaged daughter, is arrested on a drug charge. He goes to the police station to see the relevant detective. The detective is not the usual veteran cop: he is young, bearded, easy. He wants to get rid of the case because it is only a small amount of drugs and there is too much paperwork involved. When the trouble is settled and Frédéric drives Sylvie home, he reproves her, and she notes that he smokes pot, too. His reply is that at least he doesn't get caught. He also learns during the drive something that doesn't surprise him: she has a boyfriend with whom she is sexually active.

The Corots are sold—two paintings cannot be divided among three heirs—and so is the house, since two of the heirs live abroad and Frédéric does not want to use it much. The family also must part with their country servant, Eloise, who has loved them for years and whom they treat generously. (Another cheer for Assayas: he makes the loyal-old-servant cliché fresh by underplaying it, leaving the tears up to us.)

In the last weekend before new owners take over the house, Frédéric allows Sylvie to give a party there. (The place is almost unfurnished by now.) The teenagers pour in with music and booze. In the last scene Sylvie and her boyfriend are in the field where the film began. She feels that she is on the cusp of time. The field and the house have been deeply important to her, yet she is glad to be entering an age that is free of them.

Assayas is not lamenting social change. He recognizes that for at least two centuries every new generation has looked worrisome to its forebears, every old generation has looked dusty to the young. He views this family's transition as historically typical. *Summer Hours* has a sense of flow, rather than decline.

The actors crown the film with their talents. Edith Scob, in the brief role of the poised matriarch, is quietly proud. Charles Berling as Frédéric is, as intended, just another man, likable and pitiable. Juliette Binoche, blonde for a change, is pert as Adrienne; Jérémie Renier, as Jérémie, makes his excuses credibly. Alice de Lencquesaing is Sylvie, the teenager we all know and are obliged to understand.

As writer, Assayas knows how to elide. He never trudges through trite scenes that other writers might think necessary. At the end of the first sequence, we see Hélène's family leave her house; in the next sequence in Paris, an unspecified time later, Frédéric happens to mention something that happened after Helene's death. We have been spared the deathbed, the funeral, and so on. Later, we suddenly see Frédéric in the detective's office discussing Sylvie's drug arrest. All the mere data—the discovery of Sylvie's pot, the arrest, the call to her father, all things we can immediately infer—are omitted. (Hitchcock once said that film is life with the boring bits left out.)

But what Assayas concentrates on he directs with distinction. Movement, of characters and camera, is crucial to him. Even in a room, we seem always to be traveling forward. A small touch shows his impatience with stasis: when the two brothers have coffee in a cafe, Assayas has one of them go to the counter and order the coffee rather than wait for a waiter. In the scenes where the siblings discuss their differences, he uses his camera in a mood of curiosity rather than explication. He makes us want to hear. Some silent moments speak, too. At the end of the opening section, Hélène bids goodbye to her family outside her house. The cars leave. Then

she turns, faces the now-empty house, and walks slowly up the steps. She seems to be accepting the passage of time, even accepting mortality. It is simple and beautiful. Near the end, old Eloise, the servant, comes to look at the house after it is sold, denuded, and locked. She looks in the windows, particularly at the kitchen where she spent so many of her years. She says nothing, she does nothing. She just looks in for a bit. With touches like these, Assayas makes the house itself a character moving from one era to another.

Séraphine

1 July 2009

Séraphine de Senlis (1864-1942) was a servant and a painter. She worked as a housemaid, a laundress, a butcher's helper, anything she could find. She also painted, in her room at night. Some of her work now hangs in museums.

The French director Martin Provost has made a film about her, called *Séraphine*, which he wrote with Marc Abdelnour. Laurent Brunet is at the camera, and Yolande Moreau is in the title role. Of course the prevailing sensibility was Provost's, but the gifts of all these people have created a film that holds and enfolds. And it leaves us with an ancient haunting mystery.

Séraphine is Provost's fourth feature, and clearly he wanted to do more than tell the story of her life, which is much too singular for mere recounting. He wanted the very texture of the film to amplify the story as it unfolded. With Brunet's cinematography, in which beauty is immediate, and with Moreau's acting, which is an embrace more than a performance, and with his own insight and spirit, Provost has made a picture that is almost biblical in its simplicity and its passion. More, he has brought about a paradox: *Séraphine*, like many superior films, is part of the film world yet seems nearly to renounce it.

It is 1914 in Senlis, a town not far from Paris. No music at the start, then a chorus is heard as we move across a body of water into a church and there discover Séraphine praying, singing. She is middle-aged, plain, with the face of a woman resigned to hardship but not beaten by it. Visually, the opening sequence has a suggestion of blue in it, as if the air were azure, and that tint is consistent through most of the film's indoor scenes. The outdoor scenes—the fields, the flowers, the trees—are viewed in such a way that, when eventually we see some of Séraphine's paintings, which are all of trees and flowers, we understand them. We understand, too, why at one point she climbs up a great tree merely to sit on one of its branches, to be with it, to view the world (we believe that she believes) as the tree does.

Her chief job is as a housemaid in a place where the owner, a sharp woman, takes in tenants. Séraphine is treated brusquely but is no meek slavey: she is sufficiently snippy that, from time to time, her boss reproves her. Yet she slaves. And she has her secret. At night, in her room, she paints, on small wooden panels. She works by candlelight: we even see her tip wax out of lighted church candles into a container that she takes home to refresh her own candles. She grinds her own colors: she paints with her fingers. We never discover how she learned to do any of these things: we just know that it happened.

But we do know how her work is discovered. A German art critic, Wilhelm Uhde, wealthy and renowned, comes to stay in the house where she works and, by accident, sees one of her paintings. He is immediately struck by its adoring yet forceful view of some flowers. He speaks with Séraphine and learns that she is in love

with natural things: she talks to trees, to birds, to flowers. He is taken with her ease about her extraordinary feelings. He has influence in Paris and moves to bring her work to others' attention—or would move except that it is now August 1914. The German army is advancing, and if Uhde is found here by the Germans, he will be shot as a deserter. He goes home.

He doesn't return to France until 1927, to a place not far from Senlis, but, possibly because he is involved with a new boyfriend, it is a while before he goes to see Séraphine. This time he really does bring about her critical success in the Paris art world. She makes some money, but Uhde still supports her to a considerable extent. That support is crimped by the Wall Street crash of 1929, which affects his wealth. His sponsorship is even more painfully crimped by Séraphine's mental condition, which begins to deteriorate drastically and swiftly. She is soon put in a mental hospital, where he visits and finds her in a large common room with others. He arranges private quarters for her, paying for them out of the sales of her paintings. This sadly unbalanced woman is thus paying for her own care.

Provost closes his film with a moment that is in essence true to the dark facts yet is lovely. At the end she is given a new hospital room opening on a field. She takes a small chair and starts upward to a lone tree standing on a rise. In a quite long shot we watch as she walks up the hill carrying that chair, then sits under the tree, the closest she can now come to that earlier moment in a tree. Our distance from her, the wholeness of this last shot—sky, hill, large tree, small woman—make it heartbreaking.

Ulrich Tukur as Uhde provides the contemptuous pride of a connoisseur burdened with perception when so many others are myopic. Uhde sees Séraphine as a naïve artist (something like Le Douanier Rousseau, whose career he also influenced), and Tukur convinces us that Uhde is right. Moreau (unrelated to Jeanne Moreau), a veteran of theater, film, and television, is, oddly enough, best known in France as a comedienne. Here she has clearly seen Séraphine as the role of a lifetime, and she honors it with utter understanding. Séraphine made work that will last, and Moreau has meant to do the same.

The mystery we are left with is perennial. Talent. How did this drudging housemaid learn to paint—learn to want to paint? She loves God's world, but how did she find this means of expressing it? How did she acquire the will, the insistence? These questions are in addition to the one of her sheer ability. She might have loved nature just as much and painted badly. In the play/film *Amadeus*, Peter Shaffer raised the subject of divine injustice. Why, the serious Salieri broods, does he have less talent than the comparatively frisky Mozart? Here we are left wondering how, fundamentally, Séraphine happened. The disposition of talent is, as it often is, a bit eerie.

Quiet Chaos

12 August 2009

Nanni Moretti, treasured in Europe, is scarcely known in the United States. This schism usually happens with film people whose work is strapped culturally to one country, but Moretti's writing and directing and acting are not only celebrated in Italy, they have prospered elsewhere. Not here, however, though his strongest concern is human commonality.

Sometimes, in a career that began in 1973, he has appeared in films directed by others. This is true of his latest, *Quiet Chaos*. He was co-author of the screenplay, adapted from a novel by Sandro Veronesi, but the picture was directed by someone else. Thus we get the chance with this film to concentrate on Moretti the actor, his screen presence and aura. He has often been compared to Woody Allen, but the comparison is weak. The two of them share only two qualities. Both of them are intelligent, with intelligent interests. Both of them are ordinary-looking; if their faces were not familiar, we would pass them in the street without a second glance. The differences between them, however, are drastic.

Allen is a comic, always groping through the serious toward the laugh; Moretti is no more comic than any of us and less than some. Most importantly, Allen performs for admiration and Moretti wants to avoid the atmosphere of performance. Unlike Allen, he wants us to focus on what is going on, not on him. He wants us to see ourselves in him, certainly including—apropos of modern pressures and eternal questions—the women in the audience. On screen he has created a being. In *The History of Italian Cinema*, just published in the United States, Gian Piero Brunetta has a section called “Moretti’s Films as the Diary of a Generation,” in which he writes: “Thanks to his innate talent, Moretti was able to create a sort of autobiographical pact with his audience. He became the singer of their lives and beliefs.” Perhaps *Quiet Chaos*, which is exquisitely done, will extend that pact to us.

Here Moretti plays Pietro, a successful Roman television executive in his forties. He is married and has a daughter of ten, Claudia. We see him first on a beach playing paddleball with his younger brother, Carlo. Suddenly there are calls for help from two swimmers, two women. The brothers rescue them. That same day, when Pietro gets home, he finds that his wife has been killed in an accident.

One of the rescued women figures later, strikingly, but naturally the wife’s death is catastrophic. These opening sequences of overt drama are paradoxical; from then on, the drama is internal. Pietro, in the succeeding days, is not overtly grief-stricken: he simply withdraws—into the love of Claudia. He drives her to school every morning, then he waits for her all day—all day—in the park outside, except when he stops in a café for a midday bite. After school he takes Claudia home.

Yet, even while he is sitting there in the park, he is willy-nilly involved in a big business deal affecting his company. Colleagues visit him in the park, apparently understanding, in the midst of their whirl, his withdrawal. He listens, responds briefly, keeps sitting in the park. His life there takes on texture. A boy with Down syndrome is escorted through the park every day, and Pietro switches on the headlights in his car when the boy passes because he likes to wave at them. A lovely young woman walks her dog in the park every day, and she and Pietro expect each other to be there without ever speaking. An elderly widower who lives in an apartment on the park watches Pietro, senses loneliness, and invites him up for spaghetti. Through these sequences, which form a tiny cosmos, the score by Paolo Buonvino merely tinkles, as if the arrival of each note were a step onward for Pietro. At times Moretti and Buonvino almost seem to be collaborating.

Pietro is visited, too, by Marta, his sister-in-law, who had briefly been his lover long ago and who is now pregnant. She seems almost to be using her trouble as a means to draw him back into activity. But, with sympathy, he remains where he is. His brother, Carlo, induces him one evening to try some opium to break him loose. This, too, fails to “kick in.” Pietro even has an explicit sex scene, apparently to show himself as well as us that he is still alive. But it does not alter his current pattern.

In time the most important man in his firm's current deal comes to the park to talk to him. (This boss is played by a well-known director who is not identified until the closing credits.) Pietro listens. But he is not really shaken out of his abeyance—not until Claudia, his adored and adoring daughter, asks him please to stop waiting for her all day. The other children are beginning to laugh at her. Claudia's plea, in itself and in its implication of distorted existence, jolts Pietro into accepting what he has really never forgotten: life, in its brutal, teasing way, has a role—some sort, anyway—for everyone. Pietro has been stunned for a while, recovering near his daughter. Now he resumes his performance, altered of course, but his.

I have detailed some of what happens to show that, in conventional terms, it is not much. The film depends on Moretti, who conveys the quiet chaos in Pietro with daily occurrences, not grand emotional moments. His big-nosed, bearded face seems always to be revealing what he is trying to conceal. Pietro has never been naïve: but he spends the time of the film poring over the elements in life that he is not naïve about. At the end, prompted by his daughter more than she knows, he accepts what has happened and what will happen. In any case, Claudia will be there.

The first time I saw Moretti, in 1985, he was a priest. In *The Mass Is Ended*, which he also directed, he played a young cleric who is assigned to a parish in Rome that includes a lot of his contemporaries, young men and women with whom he once partied. The special pressures thus invoked for the priest were wonderfully realized by Moretti. Other films, often autobiographical, followed. (He has been publicly radical in politics but has lately somewhat readjusted.) The last Moretti film that I saw, in 2001, was also directed by him—*The Son's Room*, a Cannes prizewinner, which was also about a bereaved man, the father of a teenaged boy. There, too, death became an occasion for appraisal of life.

Moretti is noted in Italy for helping young directors. The director of *Quiet Chaos*, Antonello Grimaldi, is hardly a newcomer—he has been making films for twenty years—but I would hazard that Moretti saw gifts in him that were not being fully used and helped him here to exercise them. Grimaldi has a good sense of integration, melding the composition of the shot and the camera angle with what is thematic in the scene. A slow circling of Pietro on his cell phone at a stressed moment underscores the troubles inside him. A long shot of the big capitalist arriving in the park, accompanied by three bodyguards, tells us all we need to know about the approach of power. Fundamentally, Grimaldi understands the film's pulse, how its kinetics move from the visible to the internal. I kept wondering how much Moretti had helped with the directing. At least he must have agreed with it, shot by shot. Anyway, the result is a film that lingers, almost musically, within the viewer.

The Maid

7 November 2009

How discomfiting it is to see a good film from a country that is low on any list of film-producing nations. *The Maid* is so good that it makes me uneasy because, as far as I can remember, it is the first picture I have seen from Chile. This apparently has been a neglect. True, the director and co-author Sebastián Silva had some of his film training in Canada and now lives in New York, but he began his training in Santiago and made both his feature films there.

His second, *The Maid*, co-written with Pedro Peirano, could hardly be more Chilean. Silva says he shot it in the house where he grew up in Santiago, and his

younger brother Agustín apparently stands in for him as the late adolescent that he was at the time of the story. Nestled in these familiarities is an unusual account of a usual occurrence. The film begins as a story about a prosperous middle-class Santiago family—mother and father, twentyish daughter, teenaged son, two small boys—who happen to have a live-in maid. We think we are in for a family tale. The focus shifts. The story is about the maid.

And there is a further shift, or realization, as the film progresses. When a story focuses on a person or persons whom we expected to be secondary—the valet in Harold Pinter's *The Servant*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's play and screenplay—we think that there is some plot-driven reason for the shift, some twist that we would have missed if we had concentrated on the principals. But Silva's point, which is quite daring, is not to disclose a plot twist but simply to view one of the usually ignored lives in a household. There are no dramatic surprises or cynical counterpoints in *The Maid*: it is simply an account of what it was like to be Raquel.

She has been with the family for twenty-three years: in fact, says the mother of the house, she arrived before their oldest child. Early in the film, they all celebrate Raquel's forty-first birthday, but Raquel is the one who celebrates it least. In the privacy of her room, we soon see that her life is bottled up in her, constrained. She loves the children and they love her; but she is no sweet domestic. Her outlets of feeling are in small tyrannies. She is jealous of her little domain of privileges, a bit bossy. Without presumption, she feels that being the maid there for so long bestows at least some emotional and executive rights on her.

One day, alone in the house, hurrying to answer the phone, she collapses. She pulls herself together in time to answer a second call. She tells no one. Not long after, however, she collapses again when there is family around. She recovers in a hospital, and the mother then insists on something that Raquel has long opposed—an assistant for her. (It's a good-sized house.) A Peruvian *au pair* girl is brought in, and Raquel soon makes her life so miserable that she quits. A tough old bird of a servant is then brought in, and after Raquel tries some of her tricks on her, the older woman quits, too. Then the mother brings in a woman almost Raquel's age who, so to speak, pacifies Raquel by understanding her. In time this third assistant leaves, too, for her own personal reasons, but changes have occurred.

Silva says that when he was the adolescent in this story, he used to wonder about the life so close to his family but quite separate from it that was going on under the same roof. This is hardly a new reaction, but the first of Silva's virtues is that he didn't dramatize—not much, anyway: he empathized. The result is not precisely exciting, but it has the pleasures of eavesdropping.

Most of the picture takes place within the house, and Silva uses it in a constantly cruising way that makes us feel like residents. Sergio Armstrong's camera is frequently handheld and keeps the picture limber. (There is, however, one zoom that is sheer movieness.) Catalina Saavedra gives Raquel an apt aggressiveness with the necessary tinge of pathos, and Mariana Loyola is entirely credible, which is saying something, as the warmhearted third assistant who does much for Raquel.

The easy competence of the whole cast makes us remember that, though Chile doesn't produce many films, it must have busy theater and television fields in order for such a corps of competent actors to be available. The same must be true of the craftsmen involved here. It is awesome to think of the many other countries, generally uncelebrated, where good filmmaking is probably going on of which we know little. This global ignorance of ours applies of course to all the arts, literature especially; but

film, when it strikes home, surges so warmly that our loss of much of the world's work feels all the more frustrating.

Samson & Delilah

11 January 2010

A film that is called *Samson & Delilah* has nothing to do with the Book of Judges or Milton. This time those are the names of two teenaged Australian aboriginals today, in a desert reserve. Apparently the filmmakers noted that some of these people have wonderfully unexpected names and decided to make use of this fact. The story, too, has not the slightest suggestion of the original. The very absence of such connection is part of the point. "Filmmakers" should almost be singular. The film was written, directed, shot, and scored by one man—Warwick Thornton. He is an Australian who has worked as a cinematographer and has directed shorts and television. This, his first feature, subtly and skillfully made, announces the arrival of a talent—several of them, in one man.

He begins with the waking Samson. (Throughout, there is a good deal of waking and sleeping.) Samson, in his mid-teens and somehow blond, rouses out of his bedclothes to the sound of country-style music, rises in his flimsy little house, and proceeds as usual to do nothing. Oh, there are three or four musicians rehearsing nearby, and Samson grabs a guitar and strums for a while; but soon he is chased away. He then spends a good deal of the morning wheeling around this scruffy village in the middle of nowhere in an abandoned old wheelchair—just for kicks.

Delilah, about his age and attractive, wakes in a similar hovel, where she lives with her grandmother. The two soon get to work painting designs on paper and cloth. The first white man we see is a dealer who comes to take some of their finished work, which he will sell for them somewhere—obviously a longstanding arrangement.

Samson and Delilah know each other, though they seemingly never speak to each other. (In fact, these two say less in the course of the film than any central film pair I can remember.) He takes to hanging around, at a little distance. Grandma chuckles and, moderately obscenely, urges Delilah to go off with him and "talk." Delilah sternly declines. Then he tails her to and through a supermarket. No response from her. Next day would seem to be the same, except that at the last moment in the supermarket she tosses a bit of packaged food at him. Through all this mere maneuvering, which—to an outsider—seems to be based in some sort of tribal decorum, we sense a relationship growing.

All of it, it must be emphasized, takes place in golden sun, bathing this bleak environment in long shadows and gorgeous skies that seem to be the source of the textile designs that we see. Soon Delilah accidentally catches a glimpse of Samson—he thinks he is alone—doing a solo erotic dance out in the desert. (Possibly related: he has a habit of getting slightly high by sniffing gasoline fumes.) This heightens her interest. His has already been heightened, we infer, and he must sense that she is interested, that her silence is proper behavior. In what is apparently further proper local style, he announces his intent simply by carrying his mattress over to her and her grandmother's house one day. From here on, he and Delilah do a lot of sleeping together—literally. Just sleeping, not far from each other.

Each of them soon suffers a violent beating from other villagers for different reasons—he because of the guitar, she because of her grandmother—and they steal the community car and flee. This flight, like most of the film, takes place wordlessly.

They are clearly now a pair, though they hardly ever speak to or touch each other. They reach a sizable town, and, almost penniless, take shelter under a viaduct, virtually as the guest of a friendly white hobo—played by the director's brother, Scott Thornton—whose chief complaint about them is that they never talk to him.

Their taciturnity reaches further. One day Samson is walking ahead when, in the background, we see two white men jump out of a car, grab Delilah, pull her into it, and drive off. Samson seems to accept her disappearance as an inevitability, and when she returns to the viaduct some time later, her face battered—and surely having been raped—he expresses his feelings by behaving as if nothing had happened. He accepts it, and so does she. The idea of their going to the police is ludicrous—two vagrants under a viaduct. Anyway, the kidnapping and abuse of aboriginal girls is apparently not unusual. (The extraordinary texture of this film is its silent bearing of what is ill as well as what is good.) In time, after subsequent adventures, they return to their community. The last shot—even though it, too, is silent—is comparatively a moment of eloquence.

Thornton's film has two mutually supportive themes. First, obviously, the sociological one, familiar but still abrasive, of the socio-economic situation of the aboriginals. (We can have our own thoughts about the United States and American Indians.) But Thornton's major theme is change in, yet survival of, tradition. This young pair, though they bear foreign names, seem to be the children of centuries of certain standards of endurance, dignity despite squalor, violence undergone, understandings that need not be spoken. Apparently Thornton has taken what he understands as the aboriginal persona, considerably battered by the present, and used it as the medium for his love story.

The lead performances by Marissa Gibson and Rowan McNamara are more disturbances in our old beliefs about acting. Gibson has done only a bit of previous acting, McNamara none, yet under Thornton's careful hand they give us these two people, genuinely, spontaneously. By now it is a fact of film history that some of the most memorable acting has come from non-actors. These youngsters add to the paradox. One of Thornton's gifts, certainly, is that he has helped these two young people to achieve it.

Ajami

11 March 2010

A Palestinian, Scandar Copti, and an Israeli, Yaron Shani, have co-written, co-directed, and co-edited *Ajami*. This title is the name of a multi-ethnic district in the city of Jaffa, so it fits the film, not merely in facts but in feeling. Copti and Shani knew what they were doing and why they were doing it.

Coincidentally, they prove again that the film medium has made a contribution to social revelation. Obviously documentary and fiction films have long recorded social data in ways that were not previously possible, but filmmakers have also developed a genre, a structural approach, that in itself is a beneficence. From dozens of cities all over the world, we have had films built of interwoven strands, all set within one overall area, keyed in interplay, usually contrasting with one another, often tinged with crime, driven with compassionate intent. We quickly sense that *Ajami*, too, is using this form: to bring us new material in a familiar way. A gripping picture in itself, it leaves us feeling experienced in more than its stories.

The intricacies of *Ajami*—lives and deaths—are present from the start. A fifteen-year-old Arab boy is fixing a tire on a car when drive-by motorcyclists shoot him. He has been killed, we soon learn, by other Arabs, Bedouins, because a member of their tribe was injured in a café owned by another family. Worse, the motorcyclists killed the wrong boy, who had just taken over the car from the offending family. An Arab leader is consulted to avoid further trouble, and at a conference between the killers and the others, a financial settlement is reached.

Braided with this account, which is treated as an unsurprising event in *Ajami*, are the *agon* of an Israeli policeman whose brother disappeared a few years ago and who learns what happened; complex drug dealings, particularly those of an Arab youth who is trying to earn money to help his hospitalized mother; an Arab frustrated about living with his Jewish girlfriend; and the rupture of romance between an Arab youth and an Arab girl because he is Muslim and she is Christian. There is more. As *Ajami* surges along, the dialogue flits frequently between Arabic and Hebrew, and Arabic flecked with Hebrew, and the subtitles keep us posted as to which is being spoken—or mocked.

No one in the cast is a professional actor except Copti, who plays a drug chief. He and Shani followed the neorealist practice of finding non-professional people steeped in the milieu, then molding their enthusiasm and commitment into truthful performances. We are told that much of the dialogue was improvised by the cast as they worked.

Of course this process is irrelevant to our viewing of the film. When we first see the granddaddy of neorealist films, De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*, we probably don't know—and it doesn't matter—that the cast is non-professional, that De Sica grabbed the boy out of a crowd that was watching him shoot a scene. What matters is the result. Yet this non-pro approach is disturbing. How are these good performances possible? We cannot help wondering how a professional cast could have improved the film. Actors would have spared the directors ten months of preparation, but there is something vaguely anarchic, iconoclastic, about the fact that, ten months or not, these performances could be done at all. And only on film. It is still an art that, in some ways, defies art. The motion-picture camera, whatever shape it may come to take, is still a somewhat frightening hive of mystery.

Vincere

8 April 2010

Here, remarkably and remarkable, is a new film by Marco Bellocchio, a survivor of the Italian post-World War II directing galaxy. His first two films, from the mid-1960s—*Fist in His Pocket* and *China Is Near*—announced the arrival of a talented troublemaker. His subject was the bourgeois family in relation to a changing society: “the connection between the family and the wider political universe,” the film historian Peter Bondanella said. Bellocchio has flared through the years prolifically, varying occasionally but in general lunging at conventional acceptances. His style could indeed be synoptically described as a series of lunges: some of them miss the mark, but—at least for the works of his that I have seen—they are rarely weak.

Politics and family are, in an extreme sense, his themes again in *Vincere*. (This Italian infinitive means “to win”: it was a Fascist slogan.) The politics here is the story of Mussolini's rise, the family is one that he once acknowledged and then ignored. We see him first as a socialist firebrand in 1914, so we may expect that we

are going to watch his conversion to Fascism and his rise to dictatorship. These matters certainly do figure in the film, but the real subject is his relation to a young woman named Ida Dalser, whom he meets at a socialist meeting and who falls overwhelmingly in love with him. As the story flows on, Mussolini recedes personally to the background: Ida's subsequent life and that of their son, also named Benito, take over. (The father was named Benito because his own father admired Benito Juárez, the Mexican liberator.)

In fact, Bellocchio and his co-screenwriter Daniela Ceselli actually skimp on much of Mussolini's career. His conversion to Fascism takes place offscreen: we see that it happened, but we don't experience it. The film's interest is in the generally neglected persons in this history, Ida and her child—even though Mussolini admits that he is the father. In 1915 he marries Rachele, his formal publicized wife who accompanies him to power, and Ida cannot even produce papers to prove her claim that she and Mussolini have been married. (Bellocchio includes a shot of Ida and Benito's church ceremony, less as proof of her truth than as evidence of her possible fantasy.)

Most of the film then becomes a drama of Ida's flailing battle against ludicrously superior power, striving for recognition of her status and her son's. A good deal of the camerawork is couched in shadow, conveying visually her sequestered place in Mussolini's life. In time Fascist forces take her son away from her and make him the ward of a party bigwig. Ida is maneuvered into mental hospitals, as is the son eventually. They die—of natural causes?—in 1937 and 1942, respectively.

Mussolini was, and was known to be, a vainglorious womanizer. (I was once told by an Italian journalist that party officials in the Palazzo Venezia used to brag to one another about the number of times the Duce had slept with their wives.) The details of the Dalser story are not a secret: two books have already been published about it. Bellocchio was clearly not breaking scandalous news: his real theme is the behemoth of power and how a woman and a boy became the merest detritus in its sweep. The film's title is more than sardonic.

Bellocchio is helped greatly by the performance of Giovanna Mezzogiorno as Ida. Love is the commonest currency in film, but not often do we see the whole-souled fervor that Mezzogiorno gives to Ida. For the young Mussolini, Bellocchio used Filippo Timi, an Italian favorite who does not have the slightest resemblance to the dictator. This wouldn't matter much—Peter O'Toole did not look like T. E. Lawrence—except that after the march on Rome in 1922, Bellocchio switches from Timi to newsreel clips of the dictator himself. Bellocchio makes this switch with aplomb, as if assuming that the viewer will understand that there are (apparently) no newsreel clips of the earlier days. But is there no young and competent actor in Italy who has some resemblance to Il Duce? Well, in any case, it is cheery to see this venturesome director still slashing away at his old double theme—family relations and politics.

Using the title *Vincere* in the United States, by the way, is a small act of daring: the distributor possibly counted on some historical echo in the public mind or perhaps on the last word of Pavarotti's favorite aria, "Vincerò" (I shall win).

The Eclipse

29 April 2010

A candle is lighted in the dark. This is the opening shot of *The Eclipse*, hinting at mystery. The next shot reveals that the candle is a taper on a table in a large hotel restaurant. Thus in its first few seconds the film suggests that it will inhabit two spheres, the mysterious and the diurnal, and that the two will virtually overlap.

This Irish film was adapted by the playwright Conor McPherson, who has directed several films, and by Billy Roche from Roche's original story. As they surely knew from the start, they took on a difficult job. The story probes the possibilities of the supernatural, yet it is couched in the doings of the day. The makers' task was to render the ghostly aspects credible without making a conventional ghost film—to embed those aspects in proximate life. Otherwise, the eerie matters would be trite without credible prosy context, and the context might possibly be a bit overly familiar without the ghostly touches.

The place is Cobh on the southern Irish coast, and the occasion in the hotel is part of the annual Cobh Literary Festival. We are there with Michael Farr, a local resident who is a volunteer assistant for the festival, a fortyish man who is a teacher but once dallied with writing and likes being around writers. Home we go with Michael after lunch to his two children and no mother. Michael's wife died two years earlier, and her absence, as photos on the wall convey, is a continuing loss.

That night Michael has the first experience that suggests the presence of a ghost. The screenplay has made it clear, as has the actor Ciarán Hinds, that Michael is a mature and sensible man, and it is this truth that makes the occurrence all the more unsettling. It is almost as if Michael were thinking, "This sort of thing doesn't happen to people like me." No phantom figure is identified, but this apparition and subsequent ones seem to have some relation to Michael's father-in-law, who is invalided in a nursing home.

The experience is in a way emphasized by the arrival at the festival the next day of a novelist whom Michael is to tend. She is Lena Morelle (played with no trace of an accent by the Danish actress Iben Hjejle). Lena is a thirtyish woman, lissome and taking, whose most recent book, in shadowy coincidence, is about ghosts and is called *The Eclipse*. (When she titled her book, Lena apparently was not referring to Antonioni's 1962 film of that name.) Michael hears her read from her book to an audience. Later he confides in her about his spooky experience.

But, as if to keep the film poised between two spheres, the worldly world is kept at center by the arrival of an American novelist named Nicholas Holden—Aidan Quinn at his winningly insolent best—with whom Lena had an affair a year earlier. Nicholas is married (one almost adds "of course") and, even though his wife is arriving soon, wants to resume things with Lena during the festival. She manages to agree and disagree. The relationship between Nick and Lena contrasts with her meetings with Michael, which are always warm but never romantic. The possibly supernatural events that happen to him are the presence of his past. He is even now more of a married man than Nicholas.

Still, the relations between the two men implode eventually, around Lena. There is a bit at the finish, typical of the film's restraint, that hints at the way in which all matters will go, yet the ending doesn't attempt to explain the story's supernatural elements. The filmmakers don't want to explain: they simply want to put possibilities before us to disturb us a little—almost like intrusions of the timeless into such a

topical matter as a literary festival. The ghostly incidents can possibly be explained through the psyche, if such an explanation is needed by the viewer. For the most part, it is as if we had simply looked around the corner of what we believe in general and are surprised to learn that there was or is such a corner.

Hinds, fairly familiar from some previous films and some Broadway appearances, is the main strength of the picture. He is one of those actors, like Humphrey Bogart and Walter Matthau, who are not at all handsome in the conventional way yet who are, oddly, more quickly credible because of it. Besides his looks, Hinds has intelligence, gravity, humor that is seasoned in travail. Hjejlé never seems to be acting, a quality that is often—here certainly—desirable in an actor. On the other hand, Quinn is playing a man who is a performer, performing his life, and Quinn secures him down to his chromosomes.

The directing of this film seems to have been something of a tightrope act, trying to keep a balance between one basic element and the other, and McPherson succeeds thoroughly. Not a great deal of it is deeply moving (though the “spirit” moments are tense), but it is always compelling through its air of intelligent risk. A round of praise, too, for the cinematographer Ivan McCullough, who makes colors vivid yet true and whose shots of the town make me regret that, though four times in Eire, I have never been in Cobh.

The Father of My Children

24 June 2010

A new French film is a bit of a puzzler for a while. It is consistently good, or else it wouldn't puzzle; still, discussing it is a challenge. *The Father of My Children* is in two parts. The first part is especially welcome: it deals with a Paris film production chief—thus a man who helps to create dream ambiances—and it deals with him in a manner that shows the grit under the dream. Then quite suddenly it alters into a different film, fulfilling the title but a drastic change. What is really sticky: the event that ends Part One and starts Part Two is what we might normally consider the end of the picture, not to be revealed in a review. But the filmmakers have put it smack in the middle and therefore made it impossible to elide.

Grégoire Canvel is a production chief, about fifty, lean, quick, rationally emotional—he responds quickly to provocations but is always in control. He is married to Sylvia and has three daughters, the oldest an early teenager. He has troubles. In the first few minutes he is constantly in motion in the busy Paris streets, walking, driving, always talking on a cell phone. His company, Moon Films, which has a picture in production now in Sweden, is in a money jam, and Grégoire is much like Douglas Fairbanks in *The Three Musketeers*, except instead of fighting off numerous swordsmen on a staircase, he is fending off numerous creditors. An immediately taking quality in him is that when he meets his family, in town or at their country house, he at once ceases to be a fraught boss and becomes a loving father—tumbling, teasing, et cetera. He is able to be completely in any moment, whatever the moment is.

Moon Films is not big, but it has had a generally successful record up to now. The offices are far from grand, and they are staffed with people who care about the films, about Grégoire. The office traffic is a smaller version of the busy streets through which we first saw him bustling. All of the staff support Grégoire in his

struggle to preserve Moon's catalogue—that is, to keep from selling off their past films to an unknown buyer in order to save the company.

In the midst of this bother Grégoire manages to visit his people in Sweden to lubricate production hassles if he can. Besides the money storms, there are blips with the genius Swedish director. Grégoire manages at least to leave them all more adjusted to their problems. Back in Paris, still moving swiftly, he continues to fence with creditors. Though he doesn't himself seem to worsen, conditions clearly do.

Then, as if in some sudden recognition of the facts, we see him withdraw some papers and a pistol from what is apparently a safe-deposit box. Without fuss or drama, he sits down on a curb in the street and burns the papers, slipping the ashes through a grate. Then he stands up and shoots himself. There in the street.

Besides the emotional shock—our response within the film itself—we feel a formal shock. Should this shooting have come so soon in the film? Isn't this the finish, not an event along the way? The world has long noted that much of the effect of Janet Leigh's murder in *Psycho* is that a star isn't usually killed off so soon. Thus Grégoire's death seems out of place.

But not for long. What follows is the real point of the picture. The pace of the film does not change. Grégoire's family, grieved deeply, nonetheless manages to move on. The writer-director, Mia Hansen-Løve, conveys through the unchanged tempo that Grégoire is still the head of this household. Sylvia, with the aid of his brother and lawyers, tries to save Moon Films. Clémence, the oldest daughter, continues to extend her acquaintance with the ups and downs of maturing. The two younger girls have steps and dodges and problems to keep them moving forward. Overall it is extraordinary that a finished character should be kept present in a film by the way that the film is edited and shot. In fact, at the end, when the family moves from Paris, the closing shots are like an encore of the opening ones—moving swiftly through the teeming streets. Grégoire continues to be the father of his children.

Louis-Do de Lencquesaing, who has worked with Chabrol and Godard and Handke and Haneke, gives Grégoire the perfect paradoxical state—complete control when he is harried. Grégoire seems so intently focused on his goals that he is unshaken by obstacles, yet within the armor of intent, he is vulnerable. De Lencquesaing's actual daughter Alice plays Grégoire's teenaged daughter and evokes in us exactly the right parental feelings. Chiara Caselli is movingly afraid and firm as her Italian mother.

Hansen-Løve began her career as an actress, then, after a period as a critic, became a director. She made some shorts, then a first feature. *The Father of My Children*, her second, shows such clarity of purpose, such dexterity of style, such concord with actors, that she whets our appetite.

Around a Small Mountain

12 August 2010

The French director Jacques Rivette presents a new film called *Around a Small Mountain*, and the first point about it is that it exists. Rivette was born in 1928. In recent months we have seen new films from Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais, both in their eighties. Jokes about French food aside, the nourishment presumably comes from French film culture.

Rivette's career has not only been long: it has been widely if not constantly celebrated. He was of course a member of the New Wave—in fact Godard and

Truffaut performed in one of his early shorts—and also a critic. For a few years in the 1960s he was the editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma*. His first film to attract wide attention was *Céline and Julie Go Boating*, whose length and disregard of cinema convention were admired by many and discussed by even more. Adventurous he has remained during a busy life, his catalogue particularly notable for his unusual, almost paradoxical interest in both theater protocol and film bohemianism. (*L'Amour Fou*, rhapsodically cinematic, is nonetheless built around a theater's rehearsals of Racine's *Andromaque*.) My own favorite Rivette, of the relatively small number that I have seen, is the four-hour version of *La Belle Noiseuse*, based on a short story by Balzac, which concentrates on an artist painting a nude. It was subsequently issued in a shorter version that seemed longer. His last film, *The Duchess of Langeais*, had tasty period style.

Rivette says that his new work derives from an idea in Raymond Roussel, a novelist and poet especially marked by his dreamlike qualities. The viewer, who will not know this fact, will anyway note the film's dreamlike quality very early. Take the seemingly commonplace opening sequence. On a pleasant summer day, on a deserted country road, a woman of a certain age is standing by her car, the hood lifted. A man drives by in a roadster, and she gestures to him that she needs help. He keeps driving. She goes back to looking at her motor. In ten seconds or so, the roadster returns. The man gets out, inspects the motor, and soon fixes it. Commonplace? Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich in *Desire*? Look again.

At the start the woman, alone and clearly incompetent in mechanics, is not especially upset, though she is stuck. She is almost amused, almost accepting. The roadster drives by, ignoring her. Again she is not especially upset: she simply seems patient. Then the man comes back, which doesn't especially surprise her. He gets out and fixes her motor—and not one word is spoken between them, neither of his regret at passing her nor of her gratitude. The sequence seems Rivette's super-subtle means of telling us that the sequence is realism, but not really.

Soon after, the man—Vittorio, we learn, an Italian—accidentally meets the woman, Kate, in a nearby town where there is a small touring circus to which she is attached. As soon as we see the circus, we know we are entering deeper into some sort of symbolism or allegory. What else are circuses for? Rivette and his co-writers fill the bill. Essentially the film soon takes on the teasing credibility of a dream—not because of anything gauzy or misty on screen, but because odd things keep happening that are unexplained yet that everyone there takes for granted.

Facts are only momentary rest spots along the film's figurative balloon journey. We see a clown act—several times—that has been performed for years by the same men. (A nod to theater.) We see torches juggled, acrobatics; we even see Kate, though she is not currently working in the show, practicing a tightrope act at low level. Vittorio, who is in a way our vicar, investigating and exploring, is himself drafted into performing.

But who supports this circus, which is virtually unattended? Where is the crew that manages the tents and so forth? Kate is here only for a sort of commemorative visit about something that happened fifteen years ago, but how did she get to be a successful Parisian stylist, which we also glimpse? After a while, she has to go back to Paris on business, but she returns to the circus because of a phone call from Vittorio. Yet she is not especially intimate with him. And who is he? He hangs around the circus for ten days, and all we know about him is that he is going from Milan to Barcelona and is not in a hurry.

The film floats us along so seductively that we almost feel ashamed for the questions, as we might be in a private dream. At the end, or near it, all the major characters, except Kate, come out through curtains and bow to us. Possibly this is Rivette's thanks to the theater, which has so often inhabited this cineaste's films. With his good directorial eye, he has encouraged Irina Lubtchansky, the cinematographer, to use colors that are both theatrical and abstract.

Sergio Castellitto, who plays Vittorio, is casual, mature, knowing but uncynical, attractive in a relaxed way. Kate is played by Jane Birkin, who has become a different woman. Anglo-French, she first drew notice as one of the young models in Antonioni's *Blow-Up* and was frequently seen thereafter in both British and French films. Always she seemed to be trying too hard, light or grave. She has now grown into an intricate, quietly humorous, tacitly deep person. This is the first time I ever wanted to see her again.

And what is it all an allegory of? Matters of loss figure in Kate's life—especially in two soliloquies—and other lives have some wrinkles, but principally the film's being is simply because of Rivette's pleasure in dreaming. How pleasantly irresponsible it is to watch a film in which nothing is fantastic yet which is never much more solid than fantasy. Like most dreams, this film is only a temporary habitation, but it is contrived for us by an experienced dreamer.

The Sicilian Girl

2 September 2010

Long ago it expanded into other places, but to think of the Mafia is to think first of Sicily. Partly, of course, this is because of the many films about the Sicilian Mafia, so many that they constitute a genre, and none of which, as far as I have seen, has been less than good. Now comes *The Sicilian Girl*, which sustains the genre in expected and unusual ways.

The expected ways, shamefully gripping, are, as always, the threats and businesslike killing. The less usual ways are in the film's factual basis. In 1991, the diary of a seventeen-year-old girl, which she had kept for five years, helped to bring some Mafia big wheels to justice. (At the start of the long trial, the prosecutor had to fake the girl's age as eighteen so that she would be a legally responsible adult.) What she learned during those five years and what happened during the trial are the coiled substance of the picture.

The director Marco Amenta had already made a documentary about the case, and has returned to the subject presumably to depict nuances of character. This is Amenta's first feature, and he has savored the chance to use what his subject provides: as he tells his sinister story, he explores a Sicilian village in all its crannies and vistas of charm, and he draws Sicilians in affecting colors.

The title character, Rita Mancuso, was born in the village of Balata. Her father is Don Michele, a local dignitary, respected and proud. (Some names of people and places have been changed.) When he walks through the village square with his family, he acknowledges greetings with a regal wave, and some people even kiss his hand. Rita and her brother Carmelo adore him. But early on a shadow falls. There is a Mafia murder in the village, and when Don Michele investigates, there are implications we do not expect. Then, because of his relative independence from the bosses, he too is killed. Subsequently, so is his son.

Rita, only eleven years old, sets her course for vengeance, far-off though it may be. Surprisingly, her mother urges her to accept, to forget. As the film proceeds, it unfolds the reasons for the mother's stony reasoning. Though she is a minor character in the story, she is a complex and enlightening one—a woman saturated in the past and probable future of her society. Through the next six years, Rita keeps a specific journal of crime in her village, moving toward the day when she is old enough to act. When she is seventeen, she manages to reach the office of the chief prosecutor in Palermo, who, after investigating, rejoices in this wealth of evidence and puts Rita in a witness protection program.

But the tenor of Rita's crusade has changed, which the prosecutor helps her to see. Her father, the appealing Don Michele, was somehow involved in the Mafia drug trade. So Rita now understands that her campaign is no longer for justice in the purest degree but solely for personal vengeance. Whatever her father and brother may have done, whatever their misdeeds, they were murdered. This alteration in purpose shakes her, but it doesn't deter her.

During her long isolated days in Palermo, enjoined by the police to leave her apartment only to buy food, she nonetheless indulges in a flirtation, later in something more serious. Partly because this is foolish, it is credible. The ending of this story—the trial and its results—are a matter of record; still, I'll let the film bring the news. I'll say only that some of the accused are convicted, and that the mother has a final angry gesture.

Amenta has found a youngster named Veronica D'Agostino for Rita, who is perfect—that is, she is just good enough to be completely convincing. Anything of an extraordinary performance would, in this case, distract from the verity that the film needs. A French actor, Gérard Jugnot, plays the prosecutor with plentiful reserves of strength and patience. (Query: was a French actor needed because no Sicilian would take on the role?) Lucia Sardo makes the mother a woman who has many reasons to be the way she is. Mirco Garrone has edited the film sinuously, and Luca Bigazzi's camera brings us the beauty of the places where these terrible things are happening.

The perennial dilemma of the Mafia persists. In Sicily and Italy and elsewhere, there are always some incorruptible people fighting it—officially and personally. These people know before they start that they cannot win. One mafioso or another may be eliminated, but Cosa Nostra will continue. No police force or government anywhere expects to eliminate crime completely, but here is a place where the government seems to be facing not a crime ring but a giant shadow government of (presumably) comparable strength. In that sense, *The Sicilian Girl* is one tense chapter in a continuing conflict.

The Girl

23 September 2010

A film about a child that is not intended to charm us is brave. *The Girl*, from Sweden, scorns the idea of charm and bravely concentrates on the life of a nine-year-old simply as a life. (We don't even learn her name.) We are left at the end with a sense of experience, not some sort of benevolence.

She is the daughter of a young couple who live in a pleasant country house. They do a sort of social work and are off to Africa on a mission with their daughter. In fact, the first thing we see is the girl getting a vaccination. At nearly the last moment, word comes that the couple can't take their daughter with them.

Disappointments and apologies flow, and luckily, an aunt is available to come and stay with the girl during the parents' absence. At least the girl's swimming lessons will now be able to continue.

Karin Arrhenius, who wrote the screenplay, has provided a series of incidents that are—with two exceptions—recognizable yet interesting. Fredrik Edfeldt, who directed, has chosen a girl named Blanca Engström who is completely credible rather than winning, and with the aid of Hoyte Van Hoytema's camera, he has laced his film with landscapes, even still lifes, that suffuse it with loveliness. (The girl, like most dwellers in lovely places, takes the beauty for granted.)

After the parents leave, she goes to swimming class one day. Each of the children is asked to dive and does so, except our girl, who doesn't. This is a possible hint of a response to being left behind by her parents. Then, unexpectedly but somehow not shockingly to the girl, the aunt in charge soon proves peculiar. Asking the child to understand, she goes off for a while with a man, after getting the girl to promise not to tell her parents. The aunt's defection stretches our belief a bit, but if we are generous, we understand that there couldn't have been any film without it.

There is never any question of danger for the girl: there is just the absence of plan and the occasional previously suppressed indulgence. (When she walks into town to shop, she buys a lipstick.) She hangs out for a while with two girls of about thirteen at a neighbor's house—two girls who are just over the border of puberty, which the girl herself is not. The older ones are obsessed with sex; the girl seems to know what they are talking about but doesn't care. The older ones manage to get a farm boy of the girl's age to join them and proceed to strip him, much to his and the girl's dismay. She and the boy later have a tussle and she accidentally injures him, which is perhaps an aftershock of the stripping.

At home she opens cans and eats. She even monkeys a bit with liquor but doesn't get drunk. She is personally untidy and unkempt. What is especially notable throughout, in practically all these adventures, is her composure. Some of the things that happen are new; all of them are being experienced alone for the first time. Yet she has the calm so often seen in children during fascination by the new. They often manage to maintain an assumed aplomb while they are plunging ahead into the unknown.

Possibly the most disturbing moment for her comes one day in the locker room at the swimming class. Her teacher, a heavy woman in her fifties, sees the girl staring at her nude body almost with petrification. The teacher chuckles and promises the same future to the girl.

Then something incredible happens—the film's second reliance on our cooperation. A huge multicolored balloon complete with passenger basket makes an emergency landing near the girl's house, and out crawls a handsome young balloonist. She invites him into the house, gives him lemonade, and lets him comb her long hair—getting the burrs out. Then he takes her for a balloon ride. We are so wonderstruck by this whole preposterous balloon episode that we hardly have the energy to disbelieve it. Can it be fantasy? It is couched in the same texture as all the rest of the picture. It is much easier to believe that it really happens, as incredible things do.

The parents return—the aunt returns just before them—and the girl goes on with her swimming lessons. Then, at the pool, comes the one incident that shows the effect that her time alone has had on her. Otherwise we just spend a hundred minutes with this serious, intelligent child who is testing a new way of living. Strangely, all

during this film without much conventional drama, we can't wait to see what will happen next.

Kawasaki's Rose

30 December 2010

Time and truth, and their effects on each other, are at the heart of *Kawasaki's Rose*. This film takes place, for the most part, in the Czech Republic today, but it deals chiefly with people who lived through the Communist tyranny of the 1970s. It probes the minds and memories of people on both sides of the political division, to find out how their experience has lived in them and how it has affected them.

Several other matters—nothing to do with the political past—involve the principals, but these other matters tend to show how subsequent events have not erased the 1970s experience; they simply form its context.

The writer and the director, Petr Jarchovský and Jan Hřebejk, were high school friends, we're told, as well as film-school collaborators, and have already produced work (unseen by me) of political weight. Patently they are men who have come to film as artists come to any other art: not primarily to manufacture hits (agreeable though that always is), but to deal with matters that concern them. It takes only the first few minutes of the film to make this clear.

Hřebejk has said that, for this film, he and Jarchovský were sparked by a historical study that demonstrated that “confronting people's statements about events that took place twenty years ago with records from the time leads to considerable ambiguity” and to “the theme of individual memory and its pitfalls.” The term “lying” is not used. Hence this story. Ramified as it is, it centers on Pavel, an elderly and eminent professor of psychiatry, who was involved in the '70s agony and who is about to be given a prestigious national award for his scientific career. Apropos of this event, a television crew is making a documentary about him. The sound engineer of this crew is Ludek, Pavel's son-in-law, who has reasons for feeling aloof from him. Ludek's wife, Lucie, is just emerging from a long hospitalization with a mixture of gratitude and caution about re-entry into the busyness of life. (She herself has a grown daughter who doesn't figure greatly in the picture—she seems to be present for the purpose of including still another generation.) Lucie's mother, Pavel's wife, is Jana, quietly regal with experience.

Two other people must be cited. First is the ex-Communist who interrogated Pavel back in the '70s, who is presumably being interviewed for the documentary, itself an extraordinary fact. He is proud of his skills and has only contempt for those of his colleagues back then who, through lack of talent, were forced to use torture. (His name is Kafka—not a rare name in that country.) And there is a sculptor named Borek, who was Jana's lover long ago, before she married Pavel, and who now lives in Sweden. He was exiled for political reasons.

This little catalogue can at least suggest possible complications, and those complications are not film fodder. Each is highly pertinent to a fully breathing character. Given the people of this story, the trouble that we see had to follow. They not only engage us, but in a subtle way they acknowledge us. They are making themselves clear—as if instead of being an audience, we were a tribunal.

The climax, of course, is the award ceremony for Pavel, which is caught in the interweaving of past and present. This is the key scene for time and truth to grapple with each other. The story ends, we think at first, with reconciliations and

acceptances—we actually see the words “The End.” Then, however, comes a very brief epilogue at a birthday party. The camera follows a large cake covered with candles as it is borne to the honoree, and when we see to whom it is presented, we note that time and truth are continuing to maul each other.

Jarchovský’s dialogue, to judge by subtitles, is sharp, almost disturbingly so, laced with intelligent satirical wit. Hrebejk directs with a camera that glides from moment to moment, face to face, answering questions that arise in us. His keen eye is aided by Martin Sacha’s intimate lighting. Hrebejk also has the ear of a musician. There is a long quarrel scene between Jana and Lucie, mother and daughter, that is shaped as a good conductor might have phrased and paced it. The playing of this scene is a beauty in itself.

No fantasy on our part could imagine a better cast. Martin Huba as Pavel combines dignity and depth perfectly. Daniela Kolářová as Jana and Lenka Vlasáková as Lucie are immediate and true. Milan Mikulčík as Ludek and Ladislav Chudík as Kafka seem to have lives before and after the film. The “show” part is Borek, the sculptor, who is iconoclastic, amused, amusing, tolerant, tacitly proud. Antonín Kratochvíl makes the colorful most of the role.

The title of the film, like some other good titles, is not appreciated until after we see the work. Advance word may be helpful here. Kawasaki is a Japanese painter who lives in Sweden with Borek. He has been unable to paint ever since his wife and daughter were killed in an accident in Japan. Now the developments in the film lead him at last to some sense of order in existence, to the point where he can paint a large canvas of a rose. Still, he is a minor character, almost a spectator, and that these filmmakers should have chosen his response for their title almost makes us feel that we, the real spectators, have painted a rose ourselves.

Hadewijch

3 February 2011

The films of the French director Bruno Dumont have earned him, besides two Cannes Festival prizes, a reputation for brutality. He has often used his manifest talent to burrow into moral darkness. But the new work that he has written and directed, *Hadewijch*, is a spiritual odyssey—the travails of Céline, a twenty-year-old theology student, in her search for further envelopment in God. Sometimes she calls herself by the title of the picture (which is the name of a thirteenth-century mystic), and the closing credits list her with her adopted character’s name, but in the film she is called Céline. The mystic is presumably the ideal toward which she, sometimes oddly, strives.

At the start she is a novice in a convent who is expelled for excessive abstinence and mortification. The Mother Superior indicts her for self-love, for carrying requirements to an extent that verges on self-absorption. Céline returns to her parents in Paris—her father is a government minister—and to a fabulous mansion on the Île Saint-Louis. (Well, opposites do occur. Millionaires’ children sometimes become leftists.) Floating along somewhat aimlessly in her nonetheless God-seeking life, one day she encounters Yassine, an Arab-French youth, in a café. He romantically pursues her—this pursuit includes a sequence on a stolen motorbike—until she tells him that she is a virgin and intends to remain one. Immediately his attitude changes to respectful friendship.

Yassine then introduces Céline to his older brother, Nassir, who is a gentle, thoughtful Muslim lay preacher. He soon understands her spiritual lostness and sets out to fill it with Islam. (Notably, his home and mosque in a Muslim center near Paris could not be less arabesque. All the buildings are rectilinear poured concrete.) As they wander and talk—their wanderings include a visit to her former convent—he gradually slips into quiet rhapsodies about violence, its beauty and soul. This seems much less a nod to Dumont's previous physicalities than an intrinsic rhapsody of Nassir's that—initially at least—seems to Céline an overlooked path to godhead. We then get more than a hint that she is involved in a bombing, though we don't actually see it.

Permutations lead her away from these views back to Christianity, and the ending connotes her wish to cleanse herself in order to be with God. She is joined at the last by a character we have glimpsed from time to time through the film, wondering why he is in it. He is a convict, a real low-life, unknown to Céline, and his appearance at the very end, his utilization in the finish, has a double implication. Possibly it implies the mysterious working of divinity, or it may indicate the sheer devilry of a clever director who wants to tease us with suspicion of a divine plan.

Dumont's gift as a director, along with the gifts of his colleagues, is what sustains this oddly constructed screenplay. Whenever we are puzzled by an action, the very being of the film itself reassures us. At such moments the director who controls the process so deftly, the cinematographer (Yves Cape) who lights so comprehendingly, the actors who are so genuine—all these people in themselves reassure us that this is a sound work. Eventually this assurance pays off—in a strange, corkscrew way. We cannot forget our questions about the picture; yet we cannot doubt that the cast and crew have made an exceptionally fine work.

Some of the questions. Why, when Céline is back in the world, does this consecrated virgin always wear a dress with a low neckline? (The exception is the masculine clothing she wears in the bombing bit.) Why doesn't she object when Yassine steals the motorbike? How does she get to and from the scene of the air raid in the Middle East to which Nassir takes her as evidence of the need for violence? (Gaza or Israel or any other locale is not named.) Julie Sokolowski, as Céline, makes us believe that these questions simply don't matter much to her as she travels along.

Dumont is clearly, despite some contradictions, an admirer of Robert Bresson. Though he is much more interested in acting than Bresson was, he too is concerned with the possibilities of spirit in the modern world. Bresson's films are the work of a devout believer. *Hadewijch* is the work of a man who cannot help wondering, despite what he knows and sees today, what it would be like to believe.

When We Leave

3 February 2011

Somewhat analogous to the position of Arabs in France is that of the Turks in Germany. Hundreds of thousands of Turkish families have been living in Germany for several generations and, as has happened with the Arabs in France, have inspired numerous films about aspects of their situation. By now that situation is so integral that the German entry for the next foreign film Oscar is mostly spoken in Turkish. *When We Leave* was written and directed by Feo Aladag, who was born in Vienna of mixed Turkish and German antecedents, has worked extensively as an actress in

Germany, and has now directed her first film—about a Turkish-German woman subject to Muslim codes in a non-Muslim country.

It opens in Istanbul, where a young mother called Umay, treated roughly by her husband, takes her small son and—understandably enough, we feel—returns to her family in Germany. But though the family is thoroughly at home in Germany, its members are strictly orthodox Muslim in their principles, and they object to Umay's marital desertion. Her father, her brothers, and even her mother believe that a little roughness is not out of order in a husband and that a son belongs to his father. Umay's younger sister is disturbed because she is engaged—to a Muslim, of course—and her fiancé's family will be upset by Umay's breach of custom. Honor is the term most frequently used by Umay's family—the honor of males, of course, which inevitably affects the females attached to them. Story complications intensify as Umay tries to help a friend, a non-Muslim young woman.

Aladag keeps her picture alive and poignant through her actors, especially Sibel Kekilli as Umay and Settar Tanrıöğen as her adamant father. Kekilli often suggests a trapped and frightened bird; Tanrıöğen conveys, even beneath his anger, a vein of fatherliness.

A Somewhat Gentle Man

17 February 2011

Stellan Skarsgård is unique. He is a truly distinguished actor with a truly undistinguished face. The first time we glimpse him, we think, "Shucks, a crew member didn't get away in time." But as he persists in being on screen and doing things, his acting begins to have something of the same effect as Dreiser's prose—certainly inelegant, equally certainly art.

This Swedish actor has appeared in films of various countries, but he says that he feels most kinship with the Norwegian director Hans Petter Moland. I have seen one of their pictures, *Aberdeen*, a nicely taut domestic drama set in England and Scotland. Their latest collaboration is *A Somewhat Gentle Man*, which gives Skarsgård a more gritty role.

The place is Norway. (Does he speak Norwegian with a Swedish accent? No one mentions it.) The first shot is a close-up of him confronting the gate of a prison. He has spent twelve years there for a murder, and he has not been a troublesome prisoner. A guard, very friendly, hands him a bottle as he leaves and urges him to go forward, forward. Thus the first minutes give us a man who has committed murder and has earned the affection of his guards. The person he murdered (we learn) was his wife's lover, so we are apparently expected to "understand." He is a man who is generally gentle but occasionally arousable.

The screenplay, by Kim Fupz Aakeson, seems homegrown, the product of its setting. It is snowy winter throughout, and even without storm scenes, survival for people seems a daily victory over living conditions. Ulrik, Skarsgård's character, has been an auto mechanic and, through a friend, is soon back at work in a garage. But it isn't just the manual labor that fixes the picture's tone. Moland's pace, the general vocal level, the sense that Ulrik is living his life like a worker on an assembly line who has to take what comes along—life is what happens to you, not what you strive for—soon set the picture's key.

Yet a lurid story is rooted in this gray environment. The man who helps get Ulrik his job is a local crime boss named Jensen. Ulrik, who had once been involved

with Jensen, is in debt to him because Jensen supported Ulrik's wife and son while he was in prison. The wife is gone, the son is now a man with a pregnant girlfriend, and Jensen wants a considerable return favor from Ulrik. A snitch was responsible for Ulrik's arrest and has also injured Jensen. Jensen wants Ulrik to kill him.

Any fear that we are going to see one more version of the ex-con who tries to go straight but is sucked back into the shadows is allayed by the very texture of the picture. Moland creates a stratum of society whose humdrum quality makes the possibility of crime seem veristic, not plotty. Moland's picture is much more a social struggle than a moralistic one.

Part of that social fabric is the temper of Ulrik's sex life. He rents a dingy room where his leathery, barking landlady supplies him with dismal meals and soon demands sex. With as complete a lack of interest as is possible, he complies several times. Then, in the office of the garage where he works, there is a young woman whom he rescues from her abusive husband and who, in time, shows her gratitude—dangerously.

Though these events are necessary to keep the picture mobile, the real subject is the vacancy, the feeble hopes within Ulrik. Mixed in, too, are his feelings about the birth of his grandson. Climaxes arrive, impressed by Jensen. In the final shot, which is drastically final, we see Ulrik smiling, along with another man who also is smiling though he doesn't know Ulrik's reason.

Skarsgård understands and completes Ulrik. His acting is in primary colors, not facile but winningly declarative. Everyone else in the cast works in a more or less similar style. Moland is such a competent director that it takes a while to see how comprehending he is.

Of Gods and Men

3 March 2011

A French film called *Of Gods and Men* has had an unusual effect in France. The subject is basically factual—the abduction and murder of seven monks from the Tibhirine monastery in Algeria in 1996, apparently by Algerian dissidents. Most of the picture takes place during the time when the monks decide whether to stay or leave after the dissidents have ordered them to go.

The press reports that the picture has been a success in France, and the general reaction in editorials has been sobering. For instance, *Le Monde* said: “The monks of Tibhirine incarnate everything that the public, from the left to the right, no longer finds in society,” and then enumerated the monks' virtues. *L'Express* said that this film “offers a magnificent response to terrorists, as to soldiers, while showing the torments of those who refuse the logic of war.” The response to the picture obviously implies discomfiting memories of France's struggle in Algeria during the 1950s. It is all the more remarkable because the monks themselves never utter a word about politics.

Xavier Beauvois, the director, who collaborated with Etienne Comar on the screenplay, was interested in spiritual inquiry and has made the best such film since Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* in 1986. That both films are Catholic seems to mean only that the filmmakers were Catholic and that Catholicism offers—no more constantly than other faiths but certainly dramatically—*agons* of particular stress. Beauvois and Comar have tempered the drama with meditation: the film takes its time—but it is its time, its figurative room for thought and honesty and, of course, prayer. The result is a

rare cinematic experience, whatever the viewer's faith or lack of it. The film lets us dwell for two hours within the minds and spirits of some unusual men.

The old French monastery is located in a poor village in the Algerian mountains. The monks have not been sent here to proselytize but to lead religious lives, which includes help of every kind to the villagers. For chief instance, the oldest monk, Luc, is a doctor or at least practices simple medicine, with at least one hundred patients a day. Food and friendship are shared. Much of the monks' time is naturally spent in religion, including the singing of some venerable medieval music, which, together with prayer, seems the base of their reason for being.

Reports come to them, have been coming for some time, of horrendous violence against "liberal" Muslims committed by the ultra-rightist Muslim faction, which does not hesitate, for instance, to murder two teenaged girls for reasons of conduct and dress. A squad of those rightists visits the monastery and warns the monks to leave because they are imperial remnants. The abbot converses calmly with the leader and even quotes the Koran to him as evidence of the monks' good will. The dissidents are unimpressed. The Algerian army, too, which is in poor repute locally, is worried about the monks. An officer visits the monastery with the same request that they leave, because the military is not able to protect them. More: the abbot is summoned to a government office where again the monks are asked to leave by an obviously frightened official. They do not go.

Or at least they are making up their minds. The abbot, named Christian, knows from the start what he wants to do—to stay and fulfill his religious life and humane mission—but his brothers must decide for themselves, then vote. There is, as far as we can see, no outright fear in them, but there are varying assessments of the wisdom, of the utility to their vocation, of staying or leaving.

The center, the central strength, of the group is the abbot. Christian is played by Lambert Wilson, known from several sorts of films, who gives here an extraordinarily quiet and deep performance. Christian is a man who knows who he is and why. In him there is nothing of the cinematic priest, avaiably wise. He is a thoughtful man whose thought has evolved into illuminating faith. He transforms this film from one more *religioso* lozenge into a phenomenon of conviction.

Eventually, while the life of the monastery goes on and Christian simply continues to be himself, his brothers come to agree with him. The key moment in this epic of resolve is one evening at their refectory table when the camera simply moves from one face to another, then back again, without a word being spoken, as they agree to stay. That moment is the justification of their lives and, more importantly, of their belief.

At last we see the monks being taken prisoner and being abducted by the dissidents. We do not see the seven decapitated bodies that were eventually discovered.

The empathic cinematographer, Caroline Champetier, uses shadows in her compositions to suggest that what we see, which is graphic enough, is also taking place in a less literal world. All of the actors in the other roles deal justly with them, and a special word must go to Michael Lonsdale, veteran of so many sophisticated French and British films, who is here warm and simple as the aged Luc.

Two questions. Why is the second word of the title in the plural? Why, when the monks are seated around the table in their climactic scene and the music swells orchestrally as they remain silent, did the director choose an excerpt from *Swan Lake*? It's a thrilling passage, but it isn't hard to think of music that would be at least equally thrilling and more appropriate.

Still, Beauvois and Comar have faced a great challenge and have succeeded. Beauvois has also acted in several films, and he evidently has a prime endowment: he can envision what he wants to see before he brings it into being. What he has made is less an ode to courage than to clarity. The picture stands, even for the non-religious, as a memento of light. It is impossible for us to read anything these days—news, poetry, fiction—without encountering complaints, quite comprehensible, about the muddiness of contemporary life. Sickeningly harsh though the end of this story is, it is an account of a road to certainty. I doubt that any of these monks welcomed the assassins' bullets, but at least they knew why they were there.

Carancho

3 March 2011

Persuasive directorial talent keeps coming along. In the past months, quite apart from American work, films have arrived from Norway, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Romania, South Korea, and Israel that not only are compelling in themselves; they hearten hopes for film in general despite world conditions.

Another now comes from Argentina. Pablo Trapero's *Carancho* is essentially a familiar film, but it is handled with such assurance that it signals the arrival of another genuine talent. "Carancho" means vulture in Spanish—a word used in Argentina to signify what we would call an ambulance-chasing lawyer. Argentina has a high rate of automobile accidents, and there is a whole society of lawyers and dodgy insurance companies who feast on this fact. Trapero has slashed into this stratum of Buenos Aires life with skill and very grim humor.

The principal characters are a young female doctor who works on ambulances and a shadowy lawyer who is both a *carancho* and an attractive man. The screenplay, written by Trapero and three others, is full of inevitabilities—schemes and counter-schemes, legal maneuvers, the beginning of an affair and its trials, violence of several kinds. The details of the doctor-lawyer romance soon become less important than the texture of the slick, swift-moving world in which they live. The pace of the film is perfectly articulated and generally exciting.

I don't know if Trapero has ever seen any of Sidney Lumet's films about New York and its buzzing substrata—*Prince of the City*, for instance—but *Carancho* has the same air of familiarity, anger, and reluctant awe. Trapero is helped by a gift of understatement. Instance: the lawyer and the doctor are talking pleasantly when they meet, and he says he would like to kiss her. Laughingly, she says no. Cut to a passionate kiss in her apartment. Throughout, Trapero leaves out the transitional material that, figuratively, we have already seen.

Martina Gusman plays the doctor with a good grip on both professional competence and unostentatious charm. But, in a sense, the film relies on Ricardo Darín's performance as the lawyer. Darín, in his fifties, has an immediacy without effort that is a reminder of Spencer Tracy. We know from the beginning, because he tells us, that the lawyer is an operator. As is often true of roguish characters, this only makes us more interested. Darín is a born film actor—he conveys much more than he says.

Carancho is far from a work of stunning originality or stature. But Trapero is so fervent about his concern and so fluent in opening it all up before us that we almost welcome its tinge of familiarity. He knows how to make a film cleverly, which means in this case that it is welcome even while, essentially, we recognize it.

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives

24 March 2011

The title of a new Thai film is *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which I'll abbreviate hereafter. It was written and directed by the distinguished Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who (I've read) generously allows himself to be called Joe. I'll dare to accept. Besides its emblematic title and director's name, the picture bears another sort of signet: *Uncle Boonmee* won last year's Cannes Festival prize.

Joe's screenplay, based on a novel by a Buddhist monk, is—we must assume—very responsive to Thai culture, to Thai beliefs and interests. It deals with the last days of a prosperous Thai farmer—he produces tamarinds and honey—as he recalls or fantasizes about episodes in his past, and these episodes often contain embodied spirits. It seems fair to infer that this element is familiar and congenial to the Thai audience. When a modern American theater director tackles *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, he has to decide how to treat the play's supernatural elements. Shakespeare's audience clearly believed in them—or at least accepted them as given—but the director today has to decide how to make them credible. For Joe, however, the audience's acceptance of the supernatural is obviously no problem. Their acceptance, strangely enough, helps us to do the same.

Early in his film, Boonmee and some others are dining outdoors one evening when a woman whom they recognize slips in and sits at the table. She is Boonmee's wife, who died long ago, and the others speak to her as if she had simply gone for a stroll. Soon a figure looking like a human monkey also joins them—Boonmee's son, who disappeared thirteen years earlier and has become a Monkey Ghost, a term they all understand. We viewers are to a degree entranced by the ease with which these visitors, and later ones, are accepted.

The supernatural is only part of the film's presumable conformance to Thai culture: the shape of the film is another such. Neither dramatic nor narrative, it is a series of episodes handled in a manner that the audience seemingly recognizes. For instance, the picture begins with a twilight shot of a huge ox against a purple sky. Then we see a young ox tethered nearby that breaks loose and heads toward the big one. A young man follows and recaptures the young one. This episode is never explained, but in the picture's perspective we can later see that we are expected to understand this as a small incident in Boonmee's past that looms large, as small incidents often do, in his memory.

Soon we see Boonmee today, who is suffering from renal failure and is given dialysis at home. (This modern touch is intended apparently to affirm that the supernatural persists in the age of science.) The picture then proceeds as if it were being remembered: things happen in sequence or not, directly or tangentially concerned with Boonmee. One spacious sequence takes place in an enormous mystical cavern that Boonmee somehow connects with his birth. In another sequence, a princess—possibly Boonmee's wife as he has imagined her—is carried in a litter through a forest, looks into a pool, sees her face as she is and then as she used to be, then hears a man's voice speaking to her from the pool's depths, claiming to be a fish. Responding to such sequences, which is easy, is like a momentary visit to Thailand.

Comfortable to the last with his assumptions about his audience, Joe concludes with a sequence that takes place after Boonmee's death—in two settings, a modern hotel room complete with television and a sleek restaurant. Spirit and flesh are divisible—no fuss about it, they simply divide before our eyes. Moreover, the

television is playing scenes of Western politics. (Political thoughts, particularly hatred of rebels, fringe the film throughout: another example of Joe's belief in the immanence of the metaphysical in today's world. The communist rebels that we hear about have not wiped out the non-materialist power.)

Watching *Uncle Boonmee* is less a usual viewing of a film than it is like floating along in a boat that lets us encounter one scene after another, scenes that relate somehow to the title. Thai music enriches the voyage. The floating itself is almost as great a part of the picture as what we see.

The actors, most of whom have been in some of the director's previous work, understand thoroughly the ambience that he is creating, and they give a pleasant gentleness to both the scenes that we might expect and to the others. Their performances help to make *Uncle Boonmee* at the last a dreamy extension of our filmgoing experience.

Certified Copy

7 April 2011

The wondrous Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami has made his first fiction feature outside Iran. Not only is it set in the West—in Italy—but the dialogue is in Italian, French, and English. First-rank filmmakers are not always at their best away from home (Renoir and Antonioni in America, Bergman in Germany), but *Certified Copy* is authentically the work of the man who made *Through the Olive Trees* and *Taste of Cherry*.

This is pleasantly surprising. There is no director today who would seem less likely to prosper abroad. Yet, though Kiarostami's work has been immersed in Iranian social-religious culture, this immersion has been so rich with human comprehension that, as is often the case in art, the national verity itself became a means to reach the global. As it happens, he has spent much of the last decade traveling and probing other sorts of filmmaking elsewhere. Here in Italy he is easily, comfortably based. This versatility, about which we might have had doubts, adds to his stature.

One of his themes in the past has been the discovery of other selves within the self, the resources and mysteries within an individual. *Certified Copy* treats this theme more lightly than his past work did, but still with this director's quiet unfolding of the unusual in the usual. A man and a woman discover that, for a time at least, they can give being to two other people.

Kiarostami's screenplay, adapted by Massoumeh Lahidji—another Iranian who seems comfortably “European”—begins in Arezzo. A French woman, an art dealer, lives there with her young son. To Arezzo comes James Miller, a British author on a book tour. He has written a book with the film's title, and he is much concerned with the subject of originality. In a public talk he argues that originality is rare, that most of what we are has been inherited and will be passed on. The French woman—she is never given a name—attends his talk, and they meet. She says she can show him some relevant matters in the neighborhood, and he accepts her invitation, noting only that he must be back to catch a train at nine. (They converse in both French and English.)

Viewers may think they can foresee the pattern of the story, a romance conditioned by the clock. This, in fact, is true, but in an unforeseen way. After a visit to her studio, the French woman takes Miller to a gallery to see a drawing of a head. For a long time, that head was supposed to be ancient and valuable, but lately it was

discovered that it is only a copy, about a couple of hundred years old, and its value has shrunk. This paradox, about a drawing that was once a prized work of art and is itself unchanged, is naturally of interest to the author of *Certified Copy*. He and she wander on, through luscious Tuscany, growing all the while more relaxed with each other.

They stop in a restaurant, and the amiable hostess—speaking Italian, of course—assumes that the pair are married. They do not correct her. The hostess's supposition fits perfectly the appearance and behavior of this congenial couple, and almost immediately, without conference or plan, Miller and his new friend begin to speak like the married couple the hostess supposes them to be. The roles of husband and wife fit so snugly at this moment in this place that he and she, without any word about it, find themselves continuing to play husband and wife. There is no joshing in their role-playing, no quotation marks around their dialogue. They wander around a lovely town conversing in their new characters. Soon they even recall, so to speak, that this is the town where they spent their honeymoon. They go to the very hotel where they stayed and explain to the clerk why they would like to have a look at their old room. There she relaxes on the bed, and, still playing the role of wife, invites him to join her. Suddenly, pressed by this invitation, Miller returns to Miller, returns to outer reality. He reminds her that he has to catch a train at nine. They drop their roles.

But for a seemingly knowledgeable afternoon, these two have been self-certified copies of two other people. Under Kiarostami's hand, they have found in themselves two other credible people whom they might have been instead of themselves. The implication is that, generally undiscovered, other people dwell within us. The film in a gentle way iterates Whitman's "I contain multitudes."

Juliette Binoche, who plays the woman, is a new experience for Kiarostami: he has never before worked with an international star. They have been of value to each other: he has helped her to grace his picture with vitality, wit, temperament, and a tacit sense of adventure. Miller is played by William Shimell, an English opera singer who here makes his acting debut. Pleasantly he fills the space he occupies in the story, never as scintillating as Binoche but solid and appealing.

Kiarostami's style remains simple, unadorned, immediate. His directing once again fits his theme. Miller and the woman do a great deal of walking in the picture, on their visits to one place and another. Nothing is made of this walking, it simply occurs—yet in itself it underscores movement from one sphere to another. This picture, not nearly as deep as some of his past work, in its very agility adds dimension to this director. It seems that there is another self in Kiarostami, too, and we can hope that more selves will follow.

In a Better World

7 April 2011

By now one astonishment of film is commonplace. Numberless pictures through the decades have brought us astonishing performances by children. How do they do it? How can they understand experience, experience they have never had, so well that they can reproduce it so convincingly? All children like to pretend, but acting is not pretense, or mere pretense. And how can they do it at exactly the moment needed? Of course children also sometimes astonish us in the theater, but plays don't often rely as much on children as films do. Look at the latest instance, a Danish picture called *In a Better World*.

Two boys of about ten, Markus Rygaard and William Jøhnk Nielsen, sustain this complex story. The adult actors are flawless, but their work would come to little if the boys were not up to their level. The thoroughly skilled director, Susanne Bier, has worked well with the older people. No surprise. But we wish we could have eavesdropped on her conversations with Markus and William. The subtle shades of doubt and introspection and secrecy that Bier evokes in them would please in the adult actors but are even more affecting in the boys. No, that isn't quite true: it is only after we have been affected by them—when we consider the source—that we are more affected.

The original story was by Bier, who wrote the screenplay with Anders Thomas Jensen. The theme, not brand new, is the analogous moral struggles in parents' and children's lives. There are two settings, rural Denmark and an unnamed African country. Christian, played by William, is the son of a doctor who works in an African field hospital. (Christian's mother is dead. He lives with his grandmother.) Elias, played by Markus, has a father who is often in London, so he lives with his mother, who is estranged from his father.

Counterpoints of the sort that Ozu used comically in *I Was Born, But . . .* are used here with gravity. The behavior of a school bully with the two boys is echoed with an experience that the doctor has with a roughneck. The boys' attempt, with a homemade bomb, to avenge the doctor outlines something like the doctor's experience with a native terrorist in his hospital. Elias suffers by his weak compliance with Christian in something like the way his father's marriage is threatened by a different weakness. Possibly the most frightening of the issues is Christian's belief that his father wished for his mother's death (from cancer) in order to gain freedom. The father is shaken when he learns that his boy believes this—frightened because he doesn't know how to prove its falsity.

The picture is economically edited by Pernille Bech Christensen: though we never feel jostled, we never see a frame too much. The music by Johan Söderqvist hums along helpfully on the fringe of things. The lighting by Jacob Marlow makes Denmark look as it is advertised—clean and refreshing. Bier has understood the difficulties in her bicontinental canvas and has handled them fearlessly. If her film occasionally reminds us of others, she has fought so well for reality—those boys!—that she holds us.

A Screaming Man

26 May 2011

A film from Chad affords a different sort of contrast. An account of several kinds of modern travail, which could have been brought close and hot, is seen at a small distance—moving but narrated rather than dramatized. There are virtually no close-ups in the picture, which is grievously mistitled as *A Screaming Man*. That title is a phrase from a poem quoted at the end, but, applied here, it is like putting the title *Mortality* on Kurosawa's masterwork *To Live*. There is screaming in this film, but most of it is silent.

At first we see a gray-haired man and a young man playing around in a swimming pool. The older man is Adam, who is in charge of this pool in a luxe Chad hotel. The young man is Abdel, his son, who also works around the pool. Adam, who was once a swimming champion and is called Champ, has been in this pool job for years, loves it, is proud of his position. His son is somewhat less orthodox.

One day Adam is called in to the office and is told that he is beloved and valuable but that he is getting old. The management thinks that he should move out of the pool job to become a (relatively lesser) gatekeeper. Immediately we scent a reference to Murnau's *The Last Laugh*, and we already have seen enough to know that this director—Mahamat-Saleh Haroun—is film-wise. An extra sting here is that Abdel is to replace Adam at the pool, which the son neither knew nor planned. It is not only the move from the pool that bothers Adam: it is the knowledge that his son may not keep the job as burnished as he did.

This strained situation is soon solved cruelly. Chad is being torn apart by rebels. An army is needed to oppose them, and Abdel is drafted—dragged away, rather. He is physically hauled off. Adam is moved back to his pool job by harsh facts. Soon Abdel's girlfriend Djeneba, whom Adam and his wife have never before met, visits and tells them—after we have guessed it—that she is pregnant. They welcome her and house her. Soon Adam has to go visit Abdel in an army hospital. Then comes a finish that is both event and metaphor.

While we watch this rhythmically measured story, a kind of synesthesia takes over. We feel that we are listening to a folk song as we watch a film. Some of this effect comes from Haroun's almost bardic style. Since there are very few close shots, we see the figures moving through as if they were being talked about. Much of this effect comes from Youssoff Djaoro, who gives Adam quiet epic dignity. Tall, lithe, proud but civilly so, Adam in Djaoro's hands becomes someone we miss when he is off screen (which luckily isn't often) and who comes to seem prototypical.

Haroun, who both wrote and directed, is Chad-born and has himself been dangerously involved in its troubles. He has nonetheless managed to carry on his film career and has won prizes at Venice and Cannes. (His own life seems to mirror the double contest—war and work—of his picture.) It takes composure as well as talent to make a film of such heated moment with the near-contemplative nature of, in visual terms, a ballad.

Mozart's Sister

15 September 2011

Now to a time when the mysteries glittered. It is notable that, among all the centuries of European culture, one has always been especially liked. Yes, the Greek classic years are awesome: they make us feel noble yet unworthy. And the nineteenth century is the fullest possible embodiment of bourgeois satisfaction: what person of limited conscience couldn't have had a comfy time there? But the eighteenth century generally seems to loom above all the rest. In its every aspect—its houses, its clothes, its customs, its elegance—it seems the one century that was completely designed: by a master who wanted his century to be not only beautiful but proud.

There has been no shortage of good eighteenth-century films. But I have never seen one that captured me more completely in its being—in texture and repletion—than *Mozart's Sister*, written and directed by Ren Féret. All of us have read ourselves happy with biographies of Mozart, entranced especially by the early years of travel. Féret's film virtually begins in the Mozart carriage, with father, mother, fourteen-year-old Nannerl, and eleven-year-old Wolfgang. The simplest film purpose is at once reached: we are there. This only becomes more so when, in a snowstorm somewhere in France, an axle cracks. A layover for repairs, during which the family is put up at an abbey, opens up two more folds of the century's life.

Sequestered at this abbey are three of the French king's daughters, and one of them, called Louise, falls instantly in eighteenth-century sororal love with Nannerl. She, we know, needs it: we have seen that she is not her father's pet or prodigy. She needs affection, pure affection.

This encounter leads to a major invention of Féret's, perfectly endorsing his century's temper. Louise has a royal lover, or wishes she had, and Nannerl becomes her means of sending the lover a letter. A plot then begins at which Wycherley and Beaumarchais would have winked, a congeries of extravagances that include transvestism and whelming luxury. Matters do not end with satisfactions for all, except for us, who can watch these flummeries of amour as verities of the time in which they take place.

To attend a historical picture these days is to be set for the splendid. No one is going to attempt such a film without dazzle in mind. Féret had more than that in mind—in fact, some of the film was actually shot in Versailles. I've rarely had such a sensation of brushing through different cloths. Decorations such as vases, lamps, stands, made me feel rich simply by passing them by.

The Mozart characters are vivid. Léopold, the father, has long been a deep study and continues to be difficult. He loves his wife and daughter, but he feels personally clever to have had this son. Mother tries always to be fair. Wolfgang is usually shown as busy at music or else snoozing. On screen he is no bright light. Nannerl apparently had some talent, if now she is pretty well unknown for it. When her "affair" with the royal lover is discovered, Léopold is furious and bids her burn her scores. She obeys.

This is more or less where the story ends, as Nannerl stands once more: a glimpse of a relative of prominence, a member of a group photo of the past. Who knows how many like her there have been? Virginia Woolf once raised the subject of Shakespeare's sister, blaming paternal prejudice for the lack of a sister genius. Possible; but it isn't only machismo. There was a gifted composer named Michael Haydn, whose bad luck it was to have a brother named Joseph.

Féret's screenplay does its job, to give us a sadness of someone otherwise known as just one more person in a famous family. His chief accomplishment other than regality is to make us realize how slim our knowledge is of things we think we know.

The cinematographer was Benjamín Echazarreta, who clearly knows as much about painting as about the camera. Veronica Fruhbrot, the set designer, and Dominique Louis, who did the costumes, made me feel as if I were in the clothes. I've never had so keen a sense of what it must have been like to wear one of those wigs.

Féret took his chances in several ways by casting his daughter Marie as Nannerl. She cannot be dull, yet obviously she is not sparkling, or Léopold wouldn't make sense. Throughout the picture, Marie blossoms just enough to make perfect the film's title and being.

The Mill and the Cross

3 November 2011

Painters have long attracted filmmakers for reasons too obvious to explore. Rembrandt, Vermeer, Van Gogh, Michelangelo are only a few who have served their workaday turn on the screen. Now comes a considerable difference, itself in the hands of an eminent artist.

Lech Majewski is a Polish film, theater, and opera director recognized widely for his startling and enriching imagination. He is much taken with the paintings of Pieter Bruegel, and his film *The Mill and the Cross* is his response to two Bruegel gems. But Majewski doesn't want to dramatize Bruegel's struggles as an artist or as a citizen or as a lover or in any of the guises in which painters have come to us on film. He wants us to understand how those paintings came into being. In fact, for the first twenty minutes or so of this picture, we may feel we are in the wrong theater: we see nothing of the painter.

We are in Flanders on a morning in 1564. That is all. In this wide landscape we see people tumbling out of bed, children tossing and squabbling, breakfast being eaten, bread blessed. To demonstrate that we are not dreaming, we are then shown the cruelty of the Spanish occupying forces and the dictatorial clergy. We are beholding a world unrolled before us.

Only then do we see Bruegel himself, sketching a bit, then conversing with a nobleman friend. The two men are played respectively by the German actor Rutger Hauer and the English actor Michael York, but they have very little to say in the film. Neither does Charlotte Rampling, who plays the Virgin Mary, or a person so designated for Bruegel's purposes. All the dialogue is in English, and there isn't much.

Another Majewski touch places us in a transition state between art and life. Huge vistas are painted backdrops, subtly done. So we see Flanders as it actually was, marvelously articulated, in the foreground, and we also see it as re-created by Majewski—simultaneously.

The two Bruegel canvases of his concern are *The Mill* and *The Way to Calvary*. The first is a striking fantasy. A large mill, whose insides are the film's opening shots, has been built on top of a tower-like cliff. Of course it could never really exist: how could it have been built, and why? What farmer could bring his wheat there? But Bruegel liked the idea and made the picture; and Majewski furthered the joke by opening his film with close-ups of the mill's giant wooden mechanisms.

But the major work of interest is *The Way to Calvary*, which has more than five hundred figures in it, differently occupied as Jesus makes his way with the cross. Bruegel is concerned with the world that Jesus is passing, as seen through these people: their vastly different occupations as he passes unnoticed are what seems the truth of the matter (though of course there are some who know what is going on). It is not a huge canvas, considering its population. We see it in a museum at the end, next to *The Tower of Babel*.

The film persuades us that, at least as minor onlookers, we have experienced a moment of creation. While it was transpiring, we saw the artist doodling. (In some frozen shots one figure moved naughtily in the background.) We almost feel that we ourselves have accomplished something just by being around while Bruegel doodled.

A particular word must be said about the clothes. Deliberately I use that word rather than costumes. In many a film we have been almost inebriated with costume splendor. Here the clothes designed by Dorota Roqueplo bring realities of existence with them. This is what these people wore and how they lived.

Tomboy

29 December 2011

Tomboy is a lovely reminder that the French have long been famous for a certain sort of film—about children. At least since Jean Benoît-Lévy's *La Maternelle* in 1933, France has produced pictures about children that have warmed the world. The field is not a French preserve: few filmmaking countries have omitted comparable pictures, some of them fine indeed. But France shines.

Tomboy is to my knowledge unique: it deals with an aspect of childhood that I haven't seen treated before—the year or two that tremble on the edge of puberty and the dilemmas and temptations therein. At the start Laure, a ten-year-old girl, is traveling with her father and pregnant mother and six-year-old sister Jeanne to the family's new home, in a large housing project somewhere in the country. Laure is at the age where she could easily be mistaken for a boy. Her figure is boyish, her hair (unlike Jeanne's) is cut short, her clothes are shorts and a shirt.

It is summer, school vacation time. No sooner are they settled in the new place than mother sends Laure out to make friends, and it doesn't take long. On the steps of another building in the project sits Lisa, clearly a girl, clearly a year or two older. Lisa is on the other side of the pre-puberty plateau, as she shows by her eagerness to assume that Laure is a boy. Laure plays along, telling Lisa that her name is Michaël.

Why does she do this? Partly a child's sheer impersonating playfulness, I'd say, partly a deeply teasing curiosity—about what it would be like to be a boy. She continues the pretense for days. Lisa introduces her as Michaël to other children, and Laure plays games with them, including football, as a boy. When it comes time for them to pee, Laure manages to scurry into the bushes by herself. Still, before the next game, she fashions a sort of penis out of Play-Doh and makes her underpants bulge.

The unforeseen, of course, happens. Lisa soon develops a crush on her new boy friend and gets up the nerve to kiss her—a brief unheated kiss. Laure-Michaël is somewhat puzzled but quiet.

The masquerade would have to end anyway when school starts, but before then Jeanne gets in trouble, and Laure, as Jeanne's older brother, has to defend her, physically. Michaël is disclosed as Laure. Thus the pretense itself brings about its revelation.

The last shot is of Laure in girl's dress and Lisa facing each other. They do not speak. We feel that they have sensed complexity. Life ahead will certainly be interesting but not simple.

Every film has another story running invisibly alongside it, the story of its making. This is never more true than in the case of a film about and with children. The director's influence is especially marked here: nothing could be left, as it sometimes is with adults, to the actors. The writer-director here is Cline Sciamma, whose second feature this is, and she made me wish that I had been able to overhear this picture's corollary story, Sciamma's conversations with her young actors.

It is a continuing mystery how children, with little sophistication about films, want to be in them and often do very well. Zoé Héran, as Laure, is attractive to begin with, which helps, but how did Sciamma get her to think the role? Or Jeanne Disson as Lisa? If Sciamma's dealings with these youngsters were recorded, they would make a fascinating addition to the DVD. Musical performance is the only other art in which children do work that stands with that of adults—an at least equal mystery. Zoé Héran is not anywhere near the overpowering equivalent of, say, a young Menuhin;

yet how did a child, ten years old herself at the time, understand and convey some of living's secrets? With Sciamma's help, I suppose. Still, it's an almost awesome mystery.

Norwegian Wood

16 February 2012

Tran Anh Hung is a writer-director who was born in Vietnam, lives in Paris, and has made his latest film in Japan. It is called *Norwegian Wood*, a title familiar from the Beatles song that is also the title of a novel by Haruki Murakami, the source of this film.

The novel has been translated into thirty-three languages. Now it is translated into film, although, as Tran admits, with some changes. The book (unread by me) is a recollection: Tran puts it into the present tense with an occasional voice-over spoken by the protagonist some years later.

The story begins in 1967 with a hijinks fake duel between two students that delights the girlfriend of one of them. She is Naoko; her swain is Kizuki; the other man is his best friend, Watanabe. With these students, the '60s are not what they were with us. The lovers are seen only in conventional romantic attitudes—nothing hip. Watanabe is walking along one day when he is suddenly engulfed by a political protest group that swirls past him and, very notably, leaves him undisturbed.

Quite suddenly, and without explanation, Kizuki commits suicide. Soon afterward Watanabe leaves this university and moves to Tokyo. Sometime later, much to his surprise, Naoko follows him there, and here occurs the first of her behavioral oddities. He is reading outdoors, looks up, and sees her standing some distance off looking away—although she has come a great distance to see him. He goes to her, and they greet each other warmly. She proposes that they go for a walk, which suggests intimacy, but they walk quite rapidly with her somewhat ahead of him.

Yet soon they become amorously involved, and she tells him that she has always preferred him. They make love, and he discovers that she is a virgin. She and Kizuki could never do it successfully, she says. (The reason for his suicide?) Despite this encounter, she quite unexpectedly leaves Tokyo, leaving word that she is going to a retreat—a beautiful sanitarium, in fact—outside Kyoto.

What is especially unusual all through the above, and which continues throughout, is Tran's treatment of the material. Even in the most realistic scenes he manages to create a sense of abstraction, in passionate scenes especially. Many of the moments are shadowy, with a deep blue overcast. Tran has not literally made the story a memoir, but he has visually suggested that this is the way matters are now held in Watanabe's mind.

In the rest of the film Watanabe follows Naoko to the sanitarium and is patient and tender with her. She responds as far as possible. Then another woman thrusts herself into the story, and of course matters gnarl, sometimes darkly. The film flows on in its stream-like state, which is helped by the fact that we almost never see Watanabe in anything but his relation with these people, almost out of the rest of the world—a student who talks about exams yet who never goes to class or has any other obligations. Besides, all the principals seem to have exceptional money for students, with nice clothes, nice apartments, freedom to travel. Perhaps in some measure that is part of memory's embellishment.

The acting in the film is key. Every moment by Kenichi Matsuyama as Watanabe and Rinko Kikuchi as Naoko is valid yet seems distilled by memory rather than presented raw. At the last Tran has made a unique film, a man's memories of his palpitated student days seen in a somewhat softened dream.

The Hunter

1 March 2012

Iran is one more country of cinematic surprise. In the past, we have had unexpected free-thought films from Franco's Spain and Mao's China, for instance; from Iran in the 1990s we had films from Abbas Kiarostami and others that, in their meditative mood and humanist temper, were the opposite of the public image that Iran creates. Now from Iran comes *The Hunter* by Rafi Pitts, which is surprising politically.

Pitts—Iranian by birth, British by education, French by film experience—has been making pictures for some twenty years. *The Hunter* is his fourth feature and shows at least something of his background. It certainly shows intimacy with the Tehran in which it is mostly set, but it also has a touch of British stubborn individuality, and it reflects the dark interiority of so many French films. Out of all these sources comes presumably its political dissent, close-mouthed but potent.

Ali, who is about thirty, lives in a tiny honeycomb apartment with his wife, Sara, and their six-year-old daughter, Saba. He is a security guard at a huge automobile factory. Recurrently through the picture we glimpse Tehran's auto traffic—Californian in glut—with which Ali has a connection even though it is slim. We learn early on that he has been in prison, but we are never told why. Sara at one point says only that Ali once made a mistake; and from his behavior, even his fate, we can believe that he was jailed for political reasons.

He works the night shift at the factory, and by day he has a different persona. He drives out into the mountainous woods near Tehran with a formidable rifle and sits there, loading and fussing with it. He never really hunts anything. We see him take a couple of careful shots at last, but he clearly was not aiming at any animal. Just practicing.

Strikingly, Ali's curious existence is surrounded by politics. The opening of the picture is a view of motorcyclists riding over an American flag. Then Ali's taciturn being is surrounded by the uproar about an upcoming election on his car radio, in bars. His oddly isolated existence, though he is affectionate with his family, is shattered when he comes home from the woods one day and learns, in a painfully distended way, that both Sara and Saba have been killed in crossfire between insurgents and police. A police official tells him that only autopsy will reveal whose bullets actually killed them, but the manner of the police convinces him that they already know and are concealing it.

Now the hunter has his quarry. In his quietly strange way that now becomes quietly deranged, he shoots two policemen in a patrol car and flees. He is quite soon captured, and here the film deliberately changes character. It becomes chiefly a drama between the two cops who nab him, especially since they catch him deep in the woods and all of them are soon lost. The film ironically posits the policemen's characters against Ali's.

Throughout, the film assures us with its terse editing and fine camera work—the wintry woods look like groves of ghosts—that it is the product of a supervising

intelligence doing what it means to do, even when it surprises us. Its mostly observant temper keeps us from being greatly moved, but it holds us with its acute, almost laboratory dissection of its people's beings.

Pitts himself plays Ali and has the right face, vulpine and shadowy, for the part; not much more is required of him in a role that is close-mouthed. He seems exactly a man who has been born into the wrong time, if not the wrong place, and must just grimly follow his life along on its way. It is late in Pitts's career to welcome him, as filmmaker and actor, but it is apt.

The Kid with a Bike

5 April 2012

The Kid with a Bike shared the Grand Prix at the Cannes Festival last year with Nuri Bilge Ceylan's equally distinguished *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*. What an occasion.

The first film is by the Dardenne brothers, Jean-Pierre and Luc, who in 1996, after some twenty years of making documentaries in their native Belgium and in France, ventured into fiction. It didn't take more than their feature film breakthrough, *La Promesse*, to show that the film world was lucky in the Dardenne switch. Their subsequent pictures have confirmed the place of these two men among the peers of this realm. It has reached the point where we no longer wonder whether a new film of theirs will be good: we just wonder what it will be about.

A gratifying coincidence here for me. Readers may remember that in relatively recent issues of *The New Republic* I have dwelled on the mystery of child actors—how children inexperienced in acting and in all its socio-psychological trappings can do so well. The mystery deepens. The performance here of Thomas Doret, who plays eleven-year-old Cyril, is as authentic and thorough as any youngster's acting I can remember.

More: his performance is the largest, the most essential in the story. It all takes place, one might say, on the field of his passions and defeats. So what we have here is a project in which two of the world's leading filmmakers built everything on their possibilities with an untried boy. This oddity is not new in film history: the first foreign film I ever saw, Duvivier's *Poil de Carotte*, from 1932 with Robert Lynen in the lead, was itself not the first in that sort of venture. But Doret's remarkable achievement only deepens the mystery that began for me with Lynen.

This is a film about emotional hunger—about a boy who, though he couldn't view it this way, needs a safe place in his world, a surety. Cyril is in a Belgian orphan asylum—or rather he is not in it. Near the start he has fled the asylum searching desperately (if paradoxically) for the father who stowed him there. He knows, he says, that his father did not mean to leave him, because Dad didn't give him his bike. He makes his way to the apartment where he used to live with his father, only to find that Dad has moved and left no address. And no bike. The guards from the asylum pursue him, and he flees—into a doctor's office. He throws his arms around the first person he meets, a young woman who is waiting there. We get a hint of her character when she says gently to the desperate boy, "It's all right, but not so tight."

She is Samantha (played with ingratiating warmth by Cécile de France), a beautician with a salon of her own, who is sufficiently moved by Cyril's state to take up his case. She gets permission, with his agreement, to have him spend weekends with her as his foster parent, and she helps him look for his father. Eventually they

find the man, working in a restaurant. He is—verbally, at least—brutal with the boy: the father wants to be rid of him so that he (the father, that is) can have a fresh start in life. This bluntness doesn't discourage Cyril: he still wants to be with his father. His hunger for affection shields him from belief that his father means his rejection.

Instead, however, he goes to live with Samantha as his foster parent. She even evicts her boyfriend after he asks her to choose between Cyril and him. The rest of the film deals with Cyril's continuing search for a father—which leads him into crime. The gang leader who recruits him, a young man, is the closest Cyril comes to a substitute father, yet he tries to give his real uncaring father the loot from his crime. At last he pays in his own way for the felony he committed—another father and son are involved here—and then he continues his search with new confidence.

The directing by the Dardenne brothers reflects their previous work: it wants to be unnoticed either for virtuosity or clumsiness, yet only virtuosos can attain this ideal. Everything seemingly just happens before us, as if all of creation had occurred so that we could see these things—simply. At the finish, Cyril again mounts his bike—on which he began his search and which is almost a part of his being—and continues. His longing for his father is stronger than his father's rejection.

This picture, fine and unwavering as it is, is not quite of the dimension and depth of the first three Dardenne pictures (which also were concerned with children and parents). They had an almost Tolstoyan reach. *The Kid* doesn't have quite that emotional and thematic size. But it is assuredly a Dardenne film, a venture into strata of feeling and response that are waiting for us to be reminded of them. At the last this lovely if slightly lesser film is a work that—happily for us—these two extraordinary men didn't want to overlook as they move on.

We Have a Pope

20 April 2012

Nanni Moretti is one more of those foreign film figures who are internationally famous except in the United States. He is an Italian writer-director-actor who has been filming since around 1976 and who has a deserved reputation for the personal tone of his work. His films often present him as an inquirer into social and political and religious conditions in Italy, in a mildly radical way.

The pictures of his that I have seen give me the feeling that, in dramatic and often humorous ways, Moretti is making me privy to his own feelings. At least one of his films, *The Mass Is Ended*, sadly ignored here, is first class. Moretti there plays a thirtyish priest who is assigned to a parish in Rome where he grew up and where many of his communicants were fellow teenagers with him. The film examines both the lay and the religious life with contrasting reverence.

Moretti's latest work looks at the church sympathetically, veristically, comically. *We Have a Pope*—in the Latin original, *Habemus Papam*—is the meaning of the white smoke that arises from the chamber where the college of cardinals votes on a new pontiff. When the smoke is black, they are still voting, and the oceanic crowd in St. Peter's Square waits, praying. With the white, they cheer.

In this screenplay by Moretti, Federica Pontremoli, and Francesco Piccolo, the white smoke is only the beginning of the trouble. We have been with the cardinals while they commented and considered, often with touches that gave each a touch of individuality. (Admirably Moretti treats the clergy as human beings without a speck of facile mockery.) They agree at last on Cardinal Melville, but their decision

overwhelms Melville. He feels overwhelmed, incapable. He is even unable to step out on the balcony and bless the crowd. A spokesman makes some excuse on his behalf, and Melville retires.

A doctor is summoned, and the new pope is found physically able. A day or so passes, and a leading psychiatrist is called—a frank unbeliever. Melville responds skimpily, unhelpfully. The worldly psychiatrist passes advice to the cardinals and officials, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the entire world is wondering what happened: a new pope has been named but is invisible.

Melville, somewhat dazed still and reluctant, manages to slip out of the Vatican into the streets of Rome in civilian dress. He has modest little adventures, as any lost elderly man might have, while the world is screaming for him. Finally, exhausted, he takes a room in a hotel. There he meets a troupe of actors who are rehearsing *The Seagull*, and he is delighted. His sister loved Chekhov, and he has learned the work through her. Chekhov helps him now, with kinds of acceptance and reassurance.

Most of the film is so good that it ultimately disappoints a bit. The idea is so original and every detail is so well turned that we expect a conclusion more stirring than this pleasant Chekhovian one. Moretti and co-writers came upon a good premise—the retreating pope—but have not used it to a really large enough conclusion.

Meanwhile, we can be grateful for the richness of the environment, and for the performances. Moretti plays the unbelieving psychiatrist with great ease and openness. Melville is played by the excellent French actor Michel Piccoli, who has often appeared in Italian films. (If he is dubbed in Italian, which I don't know, it was done perfectly.) He gives us movingly the fright of a devoted man who suddenly feels unworthy.

Throughout we see the scurryings of Vatican officials dealing with the crisis. I remembered that when I was living in Rome I knew an English Catholic journalist who covered the Vatican and who often told me of backstage politickings there. I asked him once how these mundane doings affected his religion. He said, "They decrease my faith in the Church and they increase my faith in God." Some of Moretti's viewers may agree.

Monsieur Lazhar

24 May 2012

In *Monsieur Lazhar* the language is French; the place is not French legally: Canada. We are in an elementary school in Montreal, a modern attractive place. It is recess time, and the yard is filled. A boy runs back inside to get some milk. He discovers the body of a teacher who has hanged herself.

This austere beginning launches a film that means to warm us. The past teacher is not the subject: her replacement is. The violence of her departure is used only as a means of employment crisis. The principal, a caring woman, is eager to get someone who is not only competent but equally caring, someone who can deal healingly, after that suicide, with boys and girls of ten or eleven.

In walks a man who applies for the job. He has read the news of the death. The principal questions him. His name is Bachir Lazhar, he is Algerian, and taught in Algeria for seventeen years. The principal is impressed. Lazhar is congenial,

articulate, understanding of the situation. She engages him. We assume that she has done the necessary investigating.

Monsieur Lazhar is a blessing. He is an effective teacher and a quick respondent to these smart, sharp kids. An extra pleasure soon arises for us. Lazhar is not only a welcome new teacher: the man who plays him is a welcome performer. In fact, all the realism of the school, faculty, parents, is only background for him. The suicide is there in order for him to deal with it *ex post facto*. The whole film is a pleasing showpiece for him. Before long we are enjoying this bravura presentation of a well-known performer.

Though not known here, his name is Fellag, and he is vastly experienced in Algerian theater and film, along with appearances in France and elsewhere. (He also publishes short stories and novels.) As the film progressed, I saw that this professional aspect—presenting a good performer to us—was adding to my enjoyment. With a few folds, this story could have made a script for John Barrymore, like *Topaze*, or for Chaplin in anything where he comes in, delights for a while, then goes down the road alone.

Fellag is not near the greatness of those luminaries, but he certainly is accomplished enough to be worth this film. The writer-director Philippe Falardeau understood him and helped. At the end, when discoveries are made about his Algerian past, quite different from teaching, the fact that the principal did not investigate him earlier doesn't bother us. It made the picture possible.

Elena

7 June 2012

Naturalism lives. If Zola were a Russian in Russia today, he might have written *Elena*. Zola being absent, the director Andrei Zvyagintsev has written this screenplay with Oleg Negin, looking at lives with that combination of candor and regret that marks the best naturalist work. This approach in itself is a novelty in Russian films.

Another is the milieu. The history of naturalism is closely woven with suffering, with the impulse to inform the disregarding world of social or economic oppression. But *Elena*, set in contemporary Russia, is about the bourgeoisie, about the lives of those with plenty of money and of others who are close to it. So from Russia comes a film that might have come from New Jersey.

Elena and Vladimir are in their sixties, married, each for the second time. He is retired and wealthy. She, a former nurse who met him when he was sick ten years ago, is not herself rich. He has a daughter, Katya, a hedonist (as he calls her) who simply lives as she pleases with money from father. Elena has a married son, Sergey, with two children, who would like to live off Vladimir and gets enough money from him through his mother that he can loaf around. Directly and less so, both Katya, Vladimir's daughter, and Sergey, Elena's son, do nothing because of Vladimir's money.

The first half of the film puts all these lives before us in their stasis. It opens with a shot through wintry branches of a window where lights come on. Elena wakes, then wakes Vladimir in his room. The apartment is large, with multiple television sets, and a point is made of Vladimir's electric shaver. At breakfast, in response to his question, Elena tells him that she is going to visit Sergey today. His funding of Sergey thus comes up, along with his objections. She wants money so that Sasha, her

grandson, can go to university and avoid the army. Disconsolate, Vladimir says he will think about it.

Elena goes to visit Sergey, and the film details the arduous trip—train, tram, bus, a path through a wood to a distant part of the city (Moscow?). At first we wonder why the director has insisted on these details until we see that this is what the film is—an anatomy of the ways some lives are being lived, that the living of them is the point of the picture.

The visit to Sergey and family is pretty much what we would expect, especially since Elena brings money. What we do not expect is a heart attack. Vladimir visits his high-class gym and has an attack in the pool. Elena goes to a church and buys candles to put before an altar. Then she informs Katya, the daughter, who rather reluctantly goes to the hospital. The scene between her and her father is a gem: the daughter who superficially resents him because, she says, he always cared more for money than for her; the father who knows why she thinks so but adores her. Levels of feeling are subtly dissected.

Soon Vladimir is sent home in the care of Elena, the former nurse. Soon, too, he tells her that he is going to make a will that takes care of her but that gives most of his money to Katya. (Why this man has not already made a will is an unanswered question.) He scribbles some notes for his lawyer who is coming tomorrow. When she hears this, even though she has just been to a church for him, Elena, who is in charge of his pills, overdoses him. She burns his notes. His estate is then settled under Russian law, which benefits Elena.

We see the results of this windfall for her and Sergey. The film ends with the shot that opened it, outside the apartment window through wintry branches. Lives will go on in this place, in the same middleclass, padded, quasi-paralyzed way we have seen for all of them, drenched with television gab that seems to represent it. Yes, a crime has been committed, but Elena almost asks for our sympathy and understanding—a crime for her grandson's sake. (Besides, her daughter-in-law is pregnant again.)

What Zvyagintsev may not have intended but what strikes us is that all the turbulence and oppression of the Soviet days have led to commonplace consumerist lives. Obviously there is no doubt that this is a great physical and libertarian improvement for at least some Russians. But is this the life toward which everything has been meant to move? Is Zvyagintsev deploring a goal of minor satisfactions (worth a quiet murder) or is this a murmured funeral ode for red-flag aspiration?

The film flows along with an almost ruthless smoothness. Nadezhda Markina gives Elena the thoroughness that warrants all her actions, and Andrey Smirnov's Vladimir is exactly the narrow man of sudden small depths that he need be. Yelena Lyadova as the more-than-hedonist Katya is excellent.

I Wish

7 June 2012

Child actors again, but otherwise. Recently we have had leading performances by children—in Markus Schleizer's *Michael* and the Dardennes' *Kid with a Bike*—that extend the long list of fine performances by children in film history. Now the Japanese writer-director Hirokazu Kore-eda, already known for his work with children, adds to the dazzle. Instead of giving us one or two children acting impressively, his new film *I Wish* is a work in which children are the film. Numerous

adults, all of them good actors, move through *I Wish*, but the film belongs to the children. This is not by any means the first time this has been done—in several countries—but it is captivating. The two boys and their friends who are the center of things create the world in which they live.

The setting, chiefly, is the island of Kyushu. Koichi, played by twelve-year-old Koki Maeda, lives with his mother and grandparents in the south. His younger brother Ryu, played by Koki's actual brother Ohshirô, lives with his father in the north. The parents have been divorced about six months, and the boys miss each other.

Kore-eda follows them in their separate lives with their friends, their games and chatter and fantasies. The picture teems with their imaginations, engaging because they are entirely believable, even their food likes and dislikes. No patent attempt is made to charm us: we simply enter lives.

Both brothers are individually excited about a coming event: the opening of a bullet-train service that will pass nearby. They are further agog with a belief that anyone who watches the two opposite-bound bullet trains pass each other and makes a wish while he watches will have his wish granted. The brothers and a total of five friends make plans to witness such a passage and make wishes there.

They invent a way to cut school for their expedition. All seven watch and wish. (Kore-eda transfigures the crucial moment with a montage of items from the boys' memories.) Afterward the two brothers find out that they have shared a wish—about their parents.

The story and the occasional incidents with adults are sufficient to keep the film mobile. But fundamentally what holds us is the beings of the children—not cuteness, though all of them are unaffectedly appealing, and the girls are lovely. Energy. Their energy transfixes. Every adult, parent or not, is aware of the unbelievable energy in children. They flame with it. For instance, these children hardly ever walk, they run. The film is full of running, even when a boy is carrying three bags. When they come to a long flight of steps they run up, even if there is an escalator next to it. They are not showing off or exercising, that is the way they are, and their physicality underlies their imaginations.

None of this is new, nor does Kore-eda think so. Apparently he just loves it and wanted to make a film about it. He has made one that transforms the commonplace into the extraordinary.

Bonsái

28 June 2012

Onward goes the contrapuntal mode lately noted in this column. This is the method in which the style of filmmaking is in some sort of commenting relation to the story. *Bonsái*, from Chile, derived by the writer-director Cristián Jiménez from a novel by Alejandro Zambra, is the least inflected film story I can remember. It flows along placidly, heated only occasionally by a bit of sex or disco dancing. Otherwise, people talk to one another calmly, even about feelings, with verisimilitude but not much else. Meanwhile, Jiménez is recording this even-tempered life with a dazzling display of cinematic inventiveness—unusual and interesting angles, rapid cutting, unexpected close and long shots. The net effect is also unexpected. All this display is engaging.

The very first item announces bravura. A subtitle tells us that, at the end of this story about Emilia and Julio, Emilia dies and Julio lives. It is important, apparently, that we know this from the start. In fact, however, it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference. The subtitle is really only an announcement of Jiménez's heterodox intent.

They are both university students in Santiago, studying literature. A professor asks his class if anyone has read Proust. All of them raise their hands, Julio belatedly. He then gets a library copy of the first volume and takes it to a beach. Lying in the sun, he falls asleep with the book open on his chest. (Surprise shot: we see this from directly over his head looking down, *à la* Dalí.) His chest is sunburned except where the book lay, and when Emilia, his girlfriend, asks him about the white patch on his chest, he says, "Proust." References to Proust recur as the film goes on, but they have no intrinsic relevance.

The film is in six parts: three of them are set in the time of the opening, and the alternate parts are set eight years later, when Diego is bearded and has a different girlfriend. He is in the same job he had at the start, typist and assistant to a famous novelist. His new girl is a translator of Japanese. We keep leaping back and forth, eight years at a time, to no apparent purpose except that an atmosphere is sustained of conventional lives more or less in the literary world. And Proust gets mentioned often.

Also, the bonsái. This is a miniaturized tree that we see first as a seedling and then eight years later as a rugged little shrub. Again the relation of this symbol to this story is unclear. Julio, for instance, does not have a completed novel of his own at the end.

Nathalia Galgani as Emilia and Gabriela Arancibia as the second girlfriend are adequately present. Diego Noguera, as Julio, seems so intelligent that he must have known he was playing a foil for the film's style. Similarly, Jiménez, truly talented, must have had his chuckles all through the filming. So, after a fashion, do we. Now we can hope that he will find another subject and treat it straight or contrapuntally, if only it is a little less flat.

Oslo, August 31st

12 July 2012

Oslo, August 31st tells the story of Anders, a thirty-four-year-old Norwegian who has been a patient in a drug rehabilitation center near the city, is now clean, and is given permission to visit the city for one day for a job interview. The screenplay, by the director Joachim Trier and Eskil Vogt, is distantly derived from a French novel by Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (from which Louis Malle's *Le Feu Follet* also came). Trier and Vogt are neat and cunning. They give us something of Anders's state of mind before he goes: he seems to practice suicide with a rock in a lake and to be pleased that he can withstand it.

When he gets to town and visits friends before his interview, he is, by what are apparently his standards, well-behaved—that is, he is laconic and fairly amiable. All of it is presented by the actor Anders Danielsen Lie in an almost private, confidential way. Yet these meetings increasingly seem to oppress him with their flatness. Increasingly we sense that he doesn't want to get back into this banal, static world. Even a successful friend, with a pretty wife and two sweet children, confesses to him a haunting dissatisfaction. When Anders at last gets to the job interview, it fizzles.

Both liberated and angered by this, he buys some drugs and goes back to the comfy rehab place.

The film shows us early some vistas of Oslo, which have an unintended effect. Those views, plus Anders's ventures thereafter, are reminders of another work about a young man's ventures in some of those very streets—Knut Hamsun's great novel *Hunger*. Oddly, that novel helped to open up this film.

Hamsun's narrator—implicitly himself—is a young man who wants to be a writer and who is going through terrible hardships, including of course hunger, while trying to make his way. But he doesn't falter. Anders does. Although he has some qualifications for that job interview, he has no drive, no enabling purpose. Hence, we can believe, the drugs.

And thus, seen against Hamsun, this film becomes another in a genre that has lately swollen, from countries around the world: the story of young people without purpose, without (to put it basically) hope. Unemployment figures tell us about cruelties for people who want to work. These young people sometimes want to, sometimes feel it's pointless. Even jobs don't always help, as witness Anders's friend with the children.

The total of the day's aridities overwhelms him. When Anders goes for his interview, he apparently has a chance for the job, but he maneuvers the session to give himself the right to storm out—while the interviewer says, "I don't get it."

Well, we can guess at it. Hamsun's purposeful young man had not lived in the twentieth century, a period that gave little nurture to social ideals. Perhaps the twenty-first will—we have to hope—clear the air for Anders and others.

Gypsy

2 August 2012

Gypsy, a title that has often been used figuratively, is used quite literally for this Czech-Slovak film. It really deals with the Roma, the gypsies of Slovakia. Yet though most of the cast are gypsies, some of the people who worked on the picture are Czech. The screenplay by Marek Lescák and the director Martin Sulík ventures even further in cultural origin. Their picture is based—roughly but patently—on *Hamlet*. The result is curiously engaging.

The setting is the first point of interest. This present-day gypsy village clings to a steep hillside with steep rough paths and homes that are permanent shacks with pieces of galvanized tin as roofing. The interiors look more comfortable than we would expect. Adam, a somewhat dreamy fourteen-year-old who lives in that village, comes home one day to find that his father has been killed. His father's brother, who invents a barely tenable explanation of it, soon marries Adam's mother. She explains privately to him that she is doing it to protect him and her other children. That uncle is the character who is closest to his Shakespearean original—overbearing, gluttonous, smiling, and shrewd. Soon Adam is visited—not in dream or vision—by his dead father. The man himself comes to advise and strengthen his son, not with King Hamlet's hunger for revenge but to alert his son to the dangerous uncle.

As in the original play but for quite different reasons than Prince Hamlet's, Adam is slow to act. He is otherwise absorbed, by Julka, a forward and seductive girl about his age. Between his involvement with her and his various entanglements with the so-called "whites"—the non-gypsies who dominate the country—he is busy

growing up. Ultimately his father reappears, not pointedly “to whet [his] almost blunted purpose,” yet all ends as we would prefer.

The general texture of the film is constantly engaging—the way that these people, long accustomed to abuse and disadvantage, have made for themselves an accommodating and comfortable culture. (When an ostrich farmer—of all things—cheats them, they simply steal two of his ostriches, unembarrassed by the grotesqueness of the birds.) The different realm of the gypsies is so clearly established that when the dead father reappears, simply strolling in without special effects, we are not surprised. It could happen in this world.

The relationship of the gypsy village to the long-gone Jewish *shtetl* of Europe is inescapable, though only to the degree that one culture is living within another. Sulík doesn’t make this point: it is obvious. He does supply this gypsy culture as needed: people crowded around a small table for dinner as if it were always that way, or neighbors skinning a goat on their porch as we pass. Sulík is acutely aware of people’s faces and often comes quite close to them so that we may share their attractions. Jan Mizigar as Adam quite convinces us that he is distilling secrets and questions within him. Martinka Kotlarova’s Julka breathes desire and intent to satisfy that desire before she is turned off to an arranged marriage with a “white.”

La Rafle

8 November 2012

Hitler’s face appears. The screen changes. To make that face the very first image of a film is to wipe away millions of possibilities, is to affirm the ice-shock of evil. We watch these clips from the swift visit that he made to Paris in June of 1942, and bound though we already are, we wonder what this film can tell us of his hell that we don’t already know.

Then comes the amazement—in a French film called *La Rafle* (*The Round-Up*). There is very little here that a moderately well-informed person does not know, yet it is completely engrossing. As soon as Hitler has had his look around, we see one of his men addressing a yellow-starred youth, and this is the springboard from which the director makes her film leap forward to a period of history—to become breathtakingly a film about Nazi officials, French police, several Jewish families. We are told at the start that everything we will see actually took place in that June. The center—or rather a chief center—of that action is the Vel’ d’Hiv, a sports stadium that became a crude camp. The film stakes out its territories so dexterously, with a commitment to the truth of every moment, that—once again for many of us—we can hardly believe that these things really happened, and we are at the same time, once again, terribly convinced.

This is the second film by the writer-director Rose Bosch, and we very soon sense her surety, her confidence in her ingenuity, which gives virtually every shot the feeling that it has been made the best way possible. Within moments we are living in a Paris where yellow-starred children are still playing blithely. It is also the Paris in which we see Laval and Pétain and other French officials—played by actors—making other plans for those children. Chiefly those plans begin with the French police, who are helpful indeed in rounding up thousands of Jewish families on short notice, and herding them into the Vel’ d’Hiv—thousands filling the stands while a very few nurses and doctors try to care for them, especially the children. This temporary shelter is soon seen to be impossible, and the French move a considerable number to

internment camps south of Paris. The Germans want them as laborers; the French just want to be rid of their Jews, even those French-born; and many of the prisoners are shipped to Poland. The children, not useful, are retained. At last the powers must get rid of the children, too, and they rush eagerly to trains that they think will take them to their parents but that we know will take them to their deaths.

I have not said anything about the respectful understanding between a Jewish doctor (played by Jean Reno) and a Gentile nurse (Mélanie Laurent) or the family travails in at least two families or other fine details because, although every moment is flawless, it is the whole composition, the summary of released hate and greed, that is the point of Bosch's extraordinary achievement. The whole cast, including the children, fulfill Bosch's powerful rendition of a giant horror.

On the seventieth anniversary of the events, President François Hollande of France spoke feelingly about "the crime committed in France, by France." He said, "We cannot tolerate the fact that two out of three young French people do not know what the Vel' d'Hiv roundup was." Recommended: *La Rafle*.

Dangerous Liaisons

20 December 2012

Some astonishing changes can be caused in film, in the sector called adaptation—changes in an entire society. A Japanese work, *Seven Samurai*, can be re-made in Mexico. A British work, *Macbeth*, can be re-made in Japan. Success varies, for different reasons, usually depending on the new culture's receptivity to the old work. The new culture must comfortably embrace it.

Hence I expected little from a Chinese film of *Dangerous Liaisons*. Many will remember that there were two British films of this famous French novel in 1988 and 1989, both of them following an Anglophone stage adaptation, each differently comfortable on screen. The French eighteenth century of the novel snuggled fairly easily into the English eighteenth century. This seemed less likely for adaptation into Chinese.

The director Hur Jin-ho and the writer Yan Geling foresaw the troubles. They have accommodated the work to a new home. (They may have seen the South Korean version from 2003, which I missed; still they had their own fish to fry.) They sought a Chinese era that they thought would best suit the Choderlos de Laclos novel, its amatory games and etiquette. The Chinese artists were taken by the plot's central device, they knew a domestic Chinese society where they thought it would fit, and they could trim the rest. Whether the picture fits that society an outsider can hardly say, but they have made the film function successfully almost as well as in the original setting.

That setting now is Shanghai in the 1930s, long before Communist rule. The principals are all wealthy or connected to money: thus wealth replaces family and the aristocratic license of the French original as class criterion. The Rolls Royces, furs, and jewels replace the titles of France, and financial clout replaces class privilege. Xie Yifan, a wealthy businessman, is a noted libertine, with many ex-mistresses. A sixteen-year-old virgin named Beibei arrives in town, and out of boredom and ego, Xie Yifan bets a non-mistress that he can seduce the virgin. The bet itself reflects the sense of class privilege. If he succeeds, the non-mistress will give herself to him, which she certainly doesn't want to do. Other affairs play alongside the wager, as we watch it being won.

As we see Choderlos settling into his new place, we are most impressed by Hur's directing. I don't know if it is a reflection of Chinese 1930s style, but Hur's virtually continuous flow from person to person, his zooming in to start and finish a scene, and his use of close-ups to magnify his leading man's personality are in themselves seductive. The cast is largely made up of exceptionally pretty women, with Cecilia Cheung steely as the bitter non-mistress. Jang Dong-gun has the difficult task of playing a demon lover and succeeds. He is a feeling-filled movie hero.

A wry ostinato to the glistening film is that much of what goes on—visits to the Chinese opera, expensive benefits—is to raise money for refugees from the Japanese invasion, which has already begun. This aloof sympathy supports the moral chill of Choderlos.

Caesar Must Die

2 February 2013

The Taviani brothers, Paolo and Vittorio, have been making films since 1962; their work, almost always in Italy, has almost always been innovative, intense, and involved with social and political subjects. Sometimes they have not always been able to control the strength they summoned, but their films have mattered. When I learned that they were making a film of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, I was doubly alerted. I knew they would treat it in some heterodox way, and of all the Shakespeare canon, this play, ever since the Orson Welles production in 1937, has seemed the one most malleable to modern concerns. Further, I was eager to hear Shakespeare in Italian again. The best Shakespeare production I have ever seen was in Italian—Giorgio Strehler's *La Tempesta*—and the memory of that music still lingers. Now, called *Caesar Must Die*, the Taviani film has arrived. If it disappoints those two hopes, it is nonetheless differently admirable.

The Tavianis have joined forces with a man named Fabio Cavalli, a theater director who has done much work in prisons, producing plays with inmates. He was about to do *Caesar* in a Roman prison—in the high-security wing—and it was arranged for the Tavianis to film the whole process. It is quickly clear that Shakespeare was not the point; the play was cut and arranged as fit the actors' impulses, and they were asked, for their own freedom, not to attempt standard Italian but to speak in their native dialects—Neapolitan, Sicilian, and so forth. In short, this production was being done for the cast, though it was hoped that an audience would respond.

The first shot of the film is of a sword, in Brutus's hand, as he implores friends to hold it so that he can run on it. This glimpse of the play's close is followed by the very beginning of things, Cavalli's first meeting with those who want to be in the show. He bids each of them to audition by stating his name, birthplace, and address (!) in two different ways, obedient and resentful. Most of them then get a minute alone on camera in which human beings and Italy in itself are spilled before us. After Cavalli has assigned roles, he tells his cast that, because the prison's theater is being repaired, they must rehearse where they can.

Here presumably is where the Taviani touch strongly enters. They have shot almost all the scenes that followed in prison rooms, bare and enclosing, that contradict the theme of the play, a struggle for liberty and freedom. What is next most apparent, to all three directors' credit, is the acting. Most of the actors do not look like their characters. Brutus, for instance, striking as he is, is not a majestic nobleman. Each

performer, speaking in his own dialect, seems to be playing his role as he considers how his man might have been in the world he knows. Flashes of the author's text occur in the subtitles, but the rendering of the play is a contemporary view of their world, far from a version of Shakespeare. The outcries about freedom are moving, of course, but we have been told by these men themselves why they are in prison—everything from drug smuggling to multiple murders. (Brutus is played by a former inmate who has returned for the role. He is now, with good reason, trying to be a professional actor.)

With all these criminals jostling about in various emotional states, we watch for trouble, but there is only one fight, between two old enemies. We must wonder of course at the psychological complexities in these men who get out of their cells every day to become ancient Roman nobles risking their lives for freedom. We get a hint from one of them who at the close of the film says that this experience has turned his cell into prison.

The play is performed in the prison's theater, which is large and comfortable. Only the scenes literally on stage are shot in color. (Paolo Taviani has said that color is realistic; black-and-white is fantastic.) At the end, the dead Brutus is brought to his feet, and the audience cheers the cast. The actors cheer the audience. It is almost an impertinence to think that we understand the thoughts of these actors and those in the audience who are relatives and friends. But this is the intriguing privilege that the Taviani brothers have given us.

The Pirogue

2 February 2013

The Pirogue is the title of a memorable film from Senegal. ("Pirogue" is their name for a large open boat, capacity thirty, no covering, driven by an outboard engine.) Besides its intrinsic qualities, the film is a reminder of two general matters. First, countries not noted for film occasionally come up with skillfully made films—well directed and shot and edited and acted, implying a film culture there of which we know little. Second, directors these days seem to be using audience consciousness of film forms as part of their work. Recently a German film called *Barbara* used our knowledge of the thriller and the romance as part of its method. Here the director uses our experience of documentaries, particularly from Africa, as part of our engagement—and gradually to increase our admiration. Who could have thought these men were acting? Yet how could a documentary camera happen to be there at so many right moments?

In this, his third feature, the director Moussa Touré turns to a punishing practice that has been going on for years. Conditions are tough in their country and in those nearby, so men have been trying to emigrate to the Old World, Spain particularly. They can't afford regular passage, so they pay less for the trip northward by sea in a pirogue. Every year many of these boats are lost and passengers with them. Senegalese boat owners continue to sell passage profitably, and desperate men pay for it, danger and all.

Touré wants us first to know something about these people. We begin at some sort of celebration in a town. Before a pleased and gesticulating crowd, powerful men are dancing, wrestling, singing. Through the men's bodies and pride, we see that we are joining a ceremony of tradition. We then meet Baye Laye, a young fisherman who

has been asked to pilot a pirogue to Spain. He has declined. We accompany him to his home. He has a wife and son who need support. In time he accepts.

The trip is both harrowing and familiar. The wagon train in Utah and the patrol in the Sahara are stories we know, and this one is not vastly different. The difference is in Touré's concern to tell us more about his people. Quarrels, even fights occur and are quelled usually by emphasis on their general condition. A stowaway is discovered, a young woman, and the quality of these men is further drawn by the approach of only one man with a very gentle sexual offer. Small Senegalese characteristics are pointed out. A speaks to B, and when A leaves, B looks at C, his look connoting a patch of dialogue.

Horrors occur. They pass another pirogue, stalled for days, whose people plead for help. Baye sails on, his fuel and capacity already strained. A few of the men from the other boat dive overboard and swim to Baye's boat, where they are indeed cared for. Some of his passengers sicken and die. One attempts suicide. At last a fierce rainstorm kills both of their outboards. They have to make for shore: never visible, wherever it may be. Just then a helicopter from the Spanish Red Cross spots them, and the survivors are saved. The finish is brief and bitter.

The camera work by Thomas Letellier is both intimately fine and breathtaking. The cast, headed by Souleymane Seye Ndiaye as Baye, seems intent on telling the truth. The pirogue practice may still be going on, but at least Touré has done his job and has made a strong film in doing it.

The Agent

30 May 2013

In recent years Israel's racial conflicts have been a seedbed for films, some of them rather exploitative of the situation—ready-made Montague-Capulet conflicts for lovers. Here now is *The Agent*, which is much more complex and eventually much more disturbing.

Amin Jaafari is an Israeli Arab, as is his wife, Siham. He is an eminent surgeon, educated in Tel Aviv and practicing there. He and Siham have been married fifteen years and are still tenderly in love. The opening scene is their parting at a bus station as she leaves for a trip to Nablus, a parting that hurts. He then goes to a large meeting of Israeli surgeons where he is given an important award. (If it occurs to us to wonder why Siham left on a trip just before the award ceremony, we assume there must have been an urgent reason.)

Next day Amin is lunching at the hospital with friends when they hear a bomb go off, not far away. Terrorists. Soon victims are brought in—other than the seventeen killed. That night Amin is home, abed, when a call from the hospital requests him to come in. Reluctantly he obeys, and when he gets there, he finds it is not to treat a patient but to identify a corpse. It is his wife. He assumes that she happened to be in that restaurant when the suicide bomber came in, but the next day an Israeli detective presses him about his wife, dismissing the fact that Amin claims he knew her well. The detective says his own ex-wife was cheating on him for five years before he knew it.

Details arise that make Amin investigate his wife's trip to Nablus, and he finds that she never got there. Then he is given, from a relative, a farewell note from her that confirms her patriotic fervor. The walls are decked here with poster-size photos of his wife, who is now a revered martyr. Stricken, he determines to find in Nablus

her mentors. He has trouble in finding and questioning people because they all think he is being tailed by Israeli police. But at last he is faced with the truth that his wife was filled with secret but firm motives to help recover the Arabs' violated land. Presumably her superiors ordered her bomb attack just at the time that Amin was getting his Israeli award to show their defiance. We may wonder how he never suspected his wife's fervor, but we can also believe that it has actually happened or could happen. In any case Amin, educated and successful in Israel, is left stunned.

So are we. It leaves us with the prospect that lasting peace between Arabs and Jews is virtually impossible, that no matter what benefits are given Israeli Arabs, there will always be Arabs who will hate Jews as thieves. Visibly Palestinians and Jews may sign pacts; always, this film says, there will be buried hatred and infirm peace.

Ali Suliman as Amin is no flaming talent, but he is ruggedly valid throughout. Directed by Ziad Doueiri, a Lebanese, and derived from a novel by Yasmina Khadra, an Algerian, this picture may have been intended as only an intelligent drama made out of current conditions—which it is—but it leaves us with a bleak prospect that may be darker than what was intended.

Pietà

14 June 2013

It would be hard to name the most brutal example of naturalism since the style came in about a century ago, and the last place one would have looked for a contender is the Venice Film Festival. Yet the winner of the Golden Lion at last year's festival is a contender for that distinction. The film is *Pietà* by the South Korean director Kim Ki-duk, and the opening credits—extraordinarily—tell us that this is his eighteenth work, as if to assure us that this is not a cheap shot by some fly-by-night sensationalist. It is the first of Kim's pictures that I have seen, although I've read serious comment about him, and it is clear early on that he is a capable director.

It is also clear from the start that he is setting a mode of candor. The very first shot is of a young man in bed, masturbating. He is Kang-do, the setting is a slum of Seoul that is full of small machine shops, and he is a collector for a loan shark. His method is simple. The borrower agrees in advance that if the loan is not repaid on time in full, Kang-do will put that man's hand in his machine, injure it, and collect on the insurance. We see this done, and we see previous victims. Kang-do is not a rank criminal in his environment. He is accepted, but he lives with a bravado about himself and his job.

We see him do more to get his way as he moves along, but I will skip describing these things except to note that, disgusting as some of them are, the core of the film quickly seems to be one of the original points of naturalism—art as information, showing us lives we do not know.

Suddenly in Kang-do's life there appears a woman who has come to beg his pardon. She is Min-sun, in her forties, attractive, who claims to be his mother, and she begs him to forgive her for abandoning him as soon as she bore him. He ridicules her, tries to get her to quit her pretense, commits some atrocities that she endures, and ultimately rapes her. She is distraught, but nonetheless she remains to care for him, cooking and so on, enduring his rough behavior. He seems to become fond of her in a fairly filial way.

The story develops at an obliquely fiendish angle with an implied glance at the Michelangelo of the title. Lee Jung-jin as Kang-do makes us believe that this secure

double-dyed thug is nonetheless a human being with more aspects than he knew. Jo Min-soo as his claimant mother is tremulously full of the feeling she is talking about at any moment. Kim directs in a way that conveys his own feelings about what happens even while he must tell the truth. There is a touch too much of the handheld camera, but in general one senses that the very quality of the way this film was made is one of its justifications for being and for its raw moments.

The god of film is saying, "I never promised you a rose garden."

Reviewings

The Blue Angel

30 July 2001

Seventy-one years after it became world-famous, after it made its leading woman world-famous, we get the full-length original version of *The Blue Angel*. The American premiere of this restoration was in New York; during the summer and fall it will play, we are told, in “most major cities.” Lucky major cities. The original version is only twelve minutes longer than the print first shown here in 1930, but those few restored brief sequences (which I had never seen) help the film’s silhouette. These sequences, along with the fresh print and the sharp new subtitles, give us the chance to see an extraordinary work at its best.

The Blue Angel is a cask of contradictions. The first German sound film, it was made in Berlin in 1929, and is sometimes considered the ultimate flowering of the great German cinema of the 1920s; but the director, Josef von Sternberg, was technically an American. He was an Austrian émigré who had lived in America since he was seventeen (at the time of the movie he was thirty-five), had served in the U.S. Army in World War I, had succeeded in Hollywood, and was no longer fluent in the German language. Emil Jannings, the German star who had worked in Hollywood with Sternberg in a silent picture and had returned home because his accent barred him from American sound films, had sworn that he would never work with this director again; yet it was Jannings, facing his first sound film at home, who asked Sternberg to come over and direct him—even though Sternberg had made only one sound film. During the making of *The Blue Angel*, Jannings and Sternberg quarreled bitterly, yet the film contains some of the best work of each. Marlene Dietrich, the leading woman, was publicized as a Sternberg discovery, but she had already been in nine films and in numerous Berlin plays. (It was on the Berlin stage that Sternberg first saw her.) The screenplay is based, rather loosely, on a novel by Heinrich Mann, and Sternberg maintained that, despite the final credits that involve two well-known German writers, he was the real adapter of the book.

When Sternberg arrived in Berlin, he learned that there was no screenplay—not even an idea for one. Various subjects, including Rasputin, were mooted. Then Jannings brought him the Mann novel. Sternberg must have recognized that the story was a sort of drama that Jannings had already scored in, the proud man who suffers a tragic fall (the grand hotel doorman in Murnau’s *The Last Laugh*, the banker in Fleming’s *The Way of All Flesh*, the czarist general in Sternberg’s *The Last Command*), but Sternberg also saw the gleaming cinematic possibilities in the book for Jannings and himself. He then found the woman, the new Lilith, who was essential to this story.

A screen test of Dietrich (age twenty-eight) for the role is being shown as prelude to this new version. She stands facing us behind an upright piano, her arms on it, her chin on her hands in parodic coquette pose, and sings “You’re the Cream in My Coffee”—in perfectly acceptable English. Twice she sings it, and twice she breaks off to excoriate the pianist in German. With piercing hindsight, we can see at once that she was perfect for Lola Lola. (Note: as was common with many films in many countries in those days, *The Blue Angel* was shot in two languages simultaneously. After a scene was done in German, it was immediately repeated in English. It was the [inferior] English version that was first shown in the United States.)

The story is, if not especially novel, classically simple and strong. A middle-aged high school professor in an unnamed city is a bachelor living a routine existence and strutting in it. His students are all male, and he discovers, through risqué postcards, that some of them are frequenting a cabaret called *The Blue Angel* where a sexy singer named Lola Lola performs. The professor is outraged that the cabaret allows his students in, and he goes there to protest. (All of us amateur Freudians know at once why he is really going.) He meets Lola Lola in her dressing room, is knocked figuratively askew, forgets his hat (let's have a Freudian smile), returns the next evening to get it, and hears her sing one of her songs. (Marvelous songs that Friedrich Hollander wrote for the picture.) Then the professor spends the night with her. In the morning he wants to marry her. He loses his teaching job and marries Lola Lola, who is both pleased and amused, and he becomes a kind of obese poodle traveling with the show in which she stars. Between performances, he does the only job he can do for the troupe: he peddles the postcards of her to which he had once objected. The show tours and, after a few years, returns to his home town. There he is asked by the manager—and is persuaded by Lola Lola—to appear as a magician's stooge, dressed and made up as a clown, and to have eggs broken on his head. The ending of the story is inevitable. (I had seen the film many times and had shown it in courses, but had never seen the original ending. Other versions ended with a shot of Lola Lola singing.)

Emil Jannings' acting takes a bit of getting used to. He creates a performance as he goes, carefully adding stroke after stroke, and this might strike modern audiences as slow. But if we allow that he is performing to his own metronome, very conscientiously, his performance gradually becomes immense. The scene with the eggs, in which he wears a clown's wig and makeup before an audience that used to know him as a dignitary, glimpsing his wife being embraced by a man in the wings while the magician forces him to crow like a demented rooster—the utter ravage of a self-debased man—is one of the most shattering moments in all of film.

Dietrich, a bit more plump, and attractively so, than she was later permitted to be in American films, clearly was a star before she actually became one. She has the ease, the bravura, the wry contempt for the world, that were soon to become internationally known. What is here also particularly fine is the compassion that she feels for her pathetic professor-husband, her gentleness with him. The Venus in this Venusberg is as tender as she can be with her elderly Tannhäuser.

Two other members of the cast need notes. Rosa Valetti, who plays the magician's wife, was a celebrated Berlin cabaret performer who had been in the first production of the Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera*. Hans Albers, the circus strongman who causes trouble in the last sequences, became a wildly popular theater star. (After his death he was even on a German postage stamp.) These people, and the almost devilishly perfect casting throughout, create a cabaret universe into which the professor wanders as from another planet.

But the visual texture is all Sternberg. He already had a legendary reputation as a master of lighting who knew how to illuminate with shadows, a creator of worlds in which he then placed his films. (After Sternberg's first American film, Charles Chaplin engaged him to direct a non-comic film for Chaplin's then inamorata, Edna Purviance. The film was completed, was viewed by Chaplin, and then was secreted in a vault and never seen again.) Sternberg's use of symbolism throughout *The Blue Angel* is as pronounced as Jannings' acting style, and, like it, overwhelms us with its very deliberateness. In the first sequence, in the professor's home, his songbird—the only creature for which he had affection—is found dead in its cage: the professor is

thus rendered loveless. When he first enters the cabaret, which has a maritime decor, he gets tangled in a net. At the wedding party for him and Lola Lola, the magician produces eggs from the professor's nose, to be remembered in the climactic moment. Throughout the backstage scenes early in the picture, a clown in an outsize collar is in the background observing the professor, never speaking; and in the crowing scene, it is the professor who wears that collar. The symbols transmute: they grow from signifiers into components of the film's structure.

Most impressive is Sternberg's gift of concision and elaboration. Glide and dwell, glide and dwell. He knows when to compress, when to intensify. The scene in which the professor terminates his lifelong teaching career is very brief and thoroughly convincing; the cut from there to the wedding party, and the cut from the professor's objections to the postcards to his peddling them, serve as Sternberg's license to expand and exult in the major scenes—like the early ones with the professor in Lola Lola's dressing room, where physical detail seems to make the drama more grave than does the story itself. A last contradiction, then: Sternberg's very virtuosity makes the film a triumph over virtuosity.

Personal postlude: my own Sternberg contradiction. In 1965, when his autobiography appeared, his publisher's publicist called me and said that Sternberg was coming east from California to promote the book, had been invited to appear on a half-hour CBS program, and had said he wouldn't do it unless I was the interviewer. I was astonished: I had never written a word about him, and, though I was then doing a television series about film on PBS, it was broadcast only in the New York area. Of course, surprised though I was, I agreed. We met at the CBS studio, and Sternberg embraced me as if his whole life had led up to that moment. But when we went on the air, his manner changed drastically. He became curt and brusque, almost hostile. Luckily I had a copy of his book with me and so could sometimes read out passages that kept things going. And then, when the broadcast was over, he became ultra-congenial again. He took my copy of his book from me, wrote something in it, and handed it back. By the time I read what he had written, he was gone. He had inscribed the book to me (spelling my name correctly!) "with great affection," then signed it floridly. I never saw or heard from him again. I still don't understand what happened that day.

Apocalypse Now Redux

20 August 2001

Very near the end of the lengthy closing credits for *Apocalypse Now Redux* comes the line: "Portions of this film were released in 1979 under the title *Apocalypse Now*." If the first version was incomplete, the word "redux" ("brought back," "returned") doesn't apply. And the word "portion" doesn't nearly reflect the sizes of the two versions: Version Two is 196 minutes long, but Version One was 150 minutes, hardly a mere "portion" of what is now released. Still, if this statement really is the view of the director, Francis Ford Coppola, why did he snuggle it away so coyly?

Let's compare. First, for those who have forgotten or who never saw the first version, a look at the central and unchanged story. In Vietnam in 1968, an army intelligence captain named Willard is ordered to make his way upriver to the station of a colonel named Kurtz who has apparently become imperially insane, madly dangerous. Willard's job is to "terminate" him. A river patrol boat and crew are put at

Willard's disposal. Journeying through hazards and strange encounters, he finds Kurtz ensconced in jungle majesty in the ruins of a temple, attended by hundreds of native helots. After some time and some gnomish conversation between the two men, Willard completes his mission and starts home.

The screenplay by John Milius and Coppola is overtly modeled on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Willard's expedition is in essence a journey into the heart of a war in which (to quote my review in 1979) the troops were "tormented by fear and pointlessness into rank barbarities and new pits of racism. . . . Their suffering was often transmuted into gross slaughter, into drugging, into hysterical hilarity set to music." It was "a wild psychedelic war . . . a jungle discotheque with butchery." At the end of this journey Willard finds the war's epitome.

One immediate difference from Conrad, other than the obvious ones of time and place, is that his protagonist, Marlow, encounters African mysteries for the first time as he travels, but Willard is a weathered veteran of this war. In fact, the opening sequence shows him boozing it up in his hotel room, apparently recovering from a jungle experience. This difference from Marlow lessens the reactive power of Willard and makes him even more passive, more of an observer, than he was bound to be anyway through most of the film.

When he starts, he first meets a battle-hungry colonel whose helicopters devastate a Vietnamese village for Willard. This is to enable a helicopter to put a patrol boat safely in position for his journey. En route Willard and crew meet firefights; they stop at a depot upcountry that is like a shopping mall misplaced; they see a performance by visiting *Playboy* bunnies at a base in the jungle for hundreds of troops—a performance that ends in an attempt at mass rape. At last, after deaths aboard the boat, Willard sails into Kurtz's domain amid hundreds of natives watching carefully, and the story moves to its conclusion.

The chief restorations are two sequences that were deleted in 1979 for reasons of narrative pace, so clearly Coppola's view of that pace has altered. Both sequences take place along the river. First, after the *Playboy* episode, the patrol boat encounters the *Playboy* helicopter downed upriver for lack of fuel. A deal is made with the *Playboy* manager, and in exchange for some of the boat's fuel, members of the crew are allowed to visit the bunnies in their helicopter. The sequence is entirely gratuitous: it seems to have been contrived, and not very deftly, to get some sex into the picture. (Willard does not participate.)

The second big restoration is at least more germane. The boat reaches a French-owned plantation, with a luxurious house, a small private army, and a large French family in residence. (Possibly such anomalies existed—French plantations safe even though the Vietminh had hated the French long before the Americans came.) The sequence has a double purpose. First, during the conversation at the dinner table at which Willard is a guest with the family, the French patriarch expounds the French claim that they had been here for more than a century and that in their own Vietnam war they had at least been fighting for what they believed was theirs. The Americans are fighting for nothing, he says scornfully. Then, later, the patriarch's widowed daughter-in-law visits Willard's bedroom.

This long sequence is a doubtful blessing. The patriarch's speech is a blatant insert. Possibly it would have had some impact twenty years ago, before the Vietnam war was so thoroughly exposed as an American governmental deception and blunder. Even then it would have seemed mechanical, but now it is also superfluous. The chief interest in the scene is purely cinematic, a Coppola touch. The family has seated Willard on the eastern side of the dinner table so that, through all the speechifying, he

is bothered by the setting sun and has to shade his eyes. He has been put, so to speak, on the solar spot. As for the bedroom scene, it serves only to give Willard some sex without *Playboy* grossness.

About these restorations Coppola has misjudged. *Apocalypse Now* is one of the few instances where inclusion of outtakes has not helped. (Another was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.) His film was better off as it was. Still, its re-issue, even as expanded, gives us the chance to confirm that it is, though ruptured, a major work. The very concept of the film is large-scale and daring, immediately absorbing. The sheer ozone of the enterprise clearly exalted Coppola throughout. He himself has used the term “operatic” about the picture—he confirms it with the use of “The Ride of the Valkyries” during the helicopter raid—and it has the breadth and artistic embrace and floridity that the word “opera” suggests.

Details of the difficulties during the two years of shooting are by now well lodged in articles and books. (There was even an Off-Broadway play about the travails of making this film: all names were changed, of course.) Still, despite the recurrent obstacles, the picture glows with Coppola’s eagerness and talent. The journey upriver unrolls before us, synesthetically speaking, like a visible tone poem.

But the film falls short of what it might have been. Its troubles begin with the casting, particularly of Willard. The list of actors (now published) who turned down the role is saddening: Jack Nicholson, who was one of them, would by his very presence have enriched the picture. Martin Sheen, who got the role, was a much-delayed choice. Coppola actually started shooting with Harvey Keitel as Willard but, after a few weeks, was dissatisfied and replaced him. Sheen, the supposed improvement, is pallid and flat. Since Willard is only an observer through most of the story, the role needs innate force to keep it from being torpid. Sheen is limp. For the redux version I wish they could have inserted a new leading man instead of restoring the deleted sequences.

Marlon Brando, who is Kurtz, seems to have put Coppola in a bind. The director got the powerful actor he wanted and then was stuck with him. Even if all the offscreen stories had not been published, it would be easy to see that Brando is teasing the director, providing a minimum of energy. We’re told that Brando (overweight but only about half his current size) insisted on improvising some of his dialogue; this malfeasance was, apparently, another egotistical stunt that Coppola simply had to endure. Caught between an inadequate leading man and a capricious capital figure, the picture has to depend almost desperately on the rest of the actors, who are helpful, and on Vittorio Storaro’s camera, which is prodigal with several kinds of beauty.

The screenplay suffers from its reliance on Conrad because it does not rely on him heavily enough. Milius and Coppola took an armature from Conrad, the journey into the interior to find the heart of darkness, but what they produced was a tour of a terrible war with a spurious finish. The war sequences rank with those in *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon* in their bitter fierceness, and nothing that scarifies the Vietnam debacle can be unworthy; but Conrad was grappling with immensity, not specifics. Several times in this film people say that human beings contain both good and evil, but this is mild stuff compared with what Conrad implies by “the horror.”

At the end, after killing Kurtz, Willard departs, making his way through a host of natives who let him pass. (Apparently the meekness of these men who had been devoted to Kurtz is based on the thesis in *The Golden Bough* that, in the eyes of the worshippers, he who kills the god becomes the god.) Slowly, as the riverboat departs, the screen goes to black, and we hear Kurtz repeating, “The horror. The horror.” But

the true horror in this film is not what Kurtz mouths in imitation of Conrad: it is the war itself.

The Battle of Algiers

2 February 2004

Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, made in 1965, has been re-issued in fresh prints with new and more accurate subtitles. One reason given for its re-release is its topicality—the insurrections against the French rulers of the city are said to be specially resonant today. This view of topicality is odd because the film enlists our sympathy for the guerrillas—“terrorists” is the current term. The press reports that people in various government agencies have been shown the film as an instructive device. This is curious, considering that the film ends with the insurgents' victory.

Whatever the news-linked reasons for its revival, Pontecorvo's film is wonderfully worth seeing, or re-seeing, for its own sake. With the help of Algerians who had been in the struggle in the 1950s, he transforms the resistance to the French into an electric storm. The patriots scurry through the twisted streets like secret firebrands, and, while all this is happening, Pontecorvo keeps the city itself vibrant and alive.

Visually, this black-and-white film is so insistent and immediate that we have to keep reminding ourselves that it is not a documentary. (It is still denied that there are any newsreel clips in the picture.) It begins with the aftermath of a torture session, in which French soldiers have been interrogating a prisoner. The aftermath is almost as ghastly as the torture must have been. Retrospectively, this first scene becomes all the more terrible because later on we do see some of the torture.

Yet Pontecorvo has made a point of putting the French view calmly and clearly. His sympathy for the Algerian patriots never falters, but the French colonel, of the paratroopers who are brought in to settle things, is a quiet and rational man who understands his enemy's motives and methods and who considers them a professional problem to be solved.

For us, forty years afterward, there is a different problem in seeing this film. The French left Algeria in 1962, and since then the Algerians have done horrendous slaughtering of one another. It is not news that when underdogs become top dogs, they often remain dogs. But subsequent events in Algeria throw a very grim shade on the struggles of the 1950s, so movingly portrayed here.

One other odd point. Jean Martin, who plays the urbane colonel (and is the one professional actor in the cast), had ten years earlier played in two Samuel Beckett premieres in Paris. Martin was the first Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* and the first Clov in *Endgame*. This contrast is merely the chance of an actor's career; still it is wry to think that Martin had traveled from Beckett into this film, from a poet's apprehension of human mystery into this harsh realization of some of that mystery's depths.

Army of Shadows

24 April 2006

The French director Jean-Pierre Melville, who died in 1973, has become an almost private idol to some cineastes; but unlike many such idols, he deserves more renown. A step toward wider Melville knowledge is now at hand.

He began making films in 1945, right after his military service; suffused with admiration for American films, he set out to use American genres in his own way. (Even his name was an American adoption. His original surname was Grumbach, but he changed it—daringly, we might say—after he read *Moby Dick*.) A prime instance of his Gallicized use of Hollywood is *Le Samourai* (1967), unforgettable, in which Alain Delon plays a contract killer—a familiar film figure, but this one is swathed in existential mystique.

A story about Delon, possibly true, applies to the film reviewed below. In 1967 Melville was reading his screenplay of *Le Samourai* to Delon to see if the actor would accept the leading role. After Melville had read five or six pages, through which the protagonist moves silently, Delon said, “I’ll do it.” “But,” said Melville, “you haven’t even had one line of dialogue yet.” Delon said, “That’s why I’ll do it.”

This taciturnity is very marked in *Army of Shadows*, Melville’s film of 1969, which is now having its sorrily belated American premiere. The total amount of dialogue in the script makes it a contender for the “Least Talk in a Sound Film” prize. What is cannily winning is that, as we begin to realize how little is being said, we also realize that this procedure is exactly right for this picture.

Based on a novel by Joseph Kessel, Melville’s screenplay is about the French Resistance during World War II, a subject with which, in the course of his military service, he had personal experience—as did Kessel. The very first shot puts facts before us with clenched-jaw reticence. It is a long shot of the Arc de Triomphe. A column of soldiers in the distance moves from the left toward the Arc. There they wheel and come down the Champs Élysées toward us. As they approach, we see that they are German. A sad history has been synopsisized for us in our assumption that they were French and in our discovery otherwise.

It is 1942. The story, which need not be sketched here, is taut, evoking a special fright that is tinged with gratitude—about matters that we know will eventually turn out well for the cause, if not for the individuals. The film centers on a group of Resistance fighters in civilian clothes who are seemingly carrying on civilian lives. The head of the group is played by Lino Ventura, an actor little known in the United States despite a four-decade career that ended in 1987, during which he reminded many of Jean Gabin, not in looks but in quiet power. His colleagues are played by, among others, Simone Signoret, an attractive stalwart of French film, and Jean-Pierre Cassel, who was charming in his early balletic roles but who has a terrible non-dancing role here. Serge Reggiani, who played Signoret’s lover in the musky *Casque d’Or*, appears briefly as a barber whose part in the Resistance is to shave Ventura without reporting him. Reggiani’s acceptance of this tiny role is, I assume, a bow to the subject and to Melville.

One particular bit of luck for this reissue is the fact that Melville’s cinematographer, Pierre Lhomme, was on hand to help with the restoration of this thirty-five-year-old film. The result is a paradoxical beauty. Very many of the scenes are in sunlight—Melville avoided such facile stuff as shadows for suspense—yet they are chilly. The seasons vary, but the general effect is of a bright winter day that is freezing.

A salute to the distributors, Rialto Pictures. This company specializes in re-issuing films of the past, American and foreign, that deserve to be seen again—or, as in this case, for the first time—in good form. The Rialto list is admirable, and *Army of Shadows* ranks high on it.

To see a film about the Resistance these days is a peculiar experience. Who could want such conditions back again? But if in some pernicious way that should

happen, would there be people—ordinary people who had been living quite ordinary lives—who would behave as these people do? May the question remain theoretical: still, it nags.

Two or Three Things I Know about Her

11 December 2006

Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*, re-issued in a fresh print with freshened subtitles, is an astonishment because, after the forty years since it was made, it still astonishes. Godard burst into the film world in 1960 with the unprecedented, invaluable *Breathless* and followed it swiftly with a spate of films, some of which were more heterodox than fulfilled. Then he made *Two or Three Things*, his best film since his first, a picture that was—and breathtakingly still is—both revolutionary and absorbing.

The “her” of the title is, he tells us, the Paris region; but he also tells us that it is Juliette Jeanson, a young wife (played by Marina Vlady) with children; and he also tells us that it may be Vlady herself. These intertissues are parts of the ceaseless, seemingly disconsolate inquiry that the film makes into the texture of Paris life, personal lives, even political lives. (Vietnam was present in French thinking then as Iraq is today.) Prostitutions of several kinds register: in French politics, in the renovation of Paris by profitable construction, and literally in Juliette's daytime hours in a brothel to increase the family's income. (Her husband never asks her where the money comes from!)

All these subjects would nourish a conventional film, which doesn't interest Godard. The method he uses is anti-method, a rejection of the strictures contrived by the world he is criticizing. Shots of cranes, of street signs, of interesting faces, of cafe talk—of anything that catches Godard's eye or mind—slip into the film's story like sudden thoughts, and the effect is of super-reality: alert consciousness rather than formal construction.

The result is like a frozen impromptu, which certifies a Godard aim through most of his career. He seems to hate the fact that film is filmed. He tries over and over in his work to subvert movie-ness: sometimes he shows the camera, sometimes he has people say they are in a film, sometimes he inserts seemingly random thoughts and sights, and so on, always to make the film seem as spontaneous as the form permits.

On the sound track of *Two or Three Things* he whispers commentary, some of it philosophical query at the college-dorm level—shallow, yes, but genuine. (This phrase could be reversed.) What keeps the film tingling is the fact that we feel it is actually being made (yet again) at the moment we are watching it. Since 1966, so much in filmmaking has strained for novelty, yet Godard's film is still avant most of the avant-garde.

Mafioso

12 February 2007

If the name of the Italian director Alberto Lattuada registers with film enthusiasts today, it is probably because in 1950 he allowed one of his screenwriters—a man named Federico Fellini—to codirect a film with him. It was the start of Fellini's directing career, which soon eclipsed Lattuada's. This is hardly

unjust. Lattuada's work is not near Fellini's, but some of it is well worth remembering.

Now we have a chance to remember it, with one of Lattuada's best, *Mafioso*, made in 1962 with Alberto Sordi. Rialto Pictures has re-issued the film as part of its program to bring back valuable foreign pictures with freshened subtitles. The screenplay of *Mafioso* rests on a theme that was important in postwar Italian film—the contrast between northern and southern Italy (Olmi's *The Fiancés*, Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*). Apparently the end of the war made even clearer the contrast between the industrialized north and those parts of the south—Sicily, for chief instance—that were still in a previous century. (In Olmi's film, workers in a new Sicilian factory, all of whom had been farmers, do not come to work on a rainy day.)

Sordi plays a Sicilian who, white-coated and efficient, is now a technician at a Fiat plant in Milan. On his vacation he takes his blonde northern wife and their two blonde little girls back to his hometown in Sicily, which these northerners have never seen. The reunion in Sicily is full of kisses, mostly between Sordi and his relatives and friends: his wife is considerably more formal—initially, at least.

The Mafia is still what it always was in this town—supreme—and the local don is glad to see Sordi again because this up-to-date technician was once an apprentice (so to speak) in the Mafia. The don has a job for him, one that needs a new face. Sordi is torn about doing the job, torn between his past and his present, but he finally accepts because of the “concern” shown by the don and his henchmen about Sordi's family. (How solicitous and affectionate they are. How clear the threat is.) Sordi does the job, which involves a quick round trip to New York. His wife thinks he has been off on a hunting trip with old friends.

The contrast between his Milanese self and his Sicilian self is sharp enough and comic, for a time. The comedy then slips into bitter satire—about concepts of honor and the enforcements of same. The triumph of the film, its most subtle and disturbing touch, is the very last shot, back in the Fiat plant. Sordi, bound by past obligations and what they entail, has committed a crime; so, conditioned as we are by our own conventions, we expect to see the effect of the crime on him. But in the last shot he is exactly as he was in the opening—brisk, technological. He has left the crime behind him with his Sicilian self. Simply by paying no attention to the contrast, Lattuada is telling us that these cultural counterpoints will continue in Italy—even though this Fiat plant is as modern as Sicily is not.

Sordi was one of three Italian leading men in postwar Italian film—the others were Ugo Tognazzi and Nino Manfredi—who usually played the Average Man. Perhaps it was a reaction to the operatics and strutting of the fascist era, but postwar Italy had a fondness for the guy next door. Sordi always makes me wish he lived next door to me.

I Was Born, But . . .

22 July 2010

A smart distributor, on whom be peace, has decided to give a theatrical premiere to an early film by Yasujiro Ozu. This is good news, not just because the film itself—*I Was Born, But . . .*—is endearing but because it draws further attention to this Japanese master. Much of Ozu is available on DVD, including this film, but more theatrical recognition may increase this country's care for a wonderful artist.

Ozu (1903-1963) began to direct in 1927 and made a total of fifty-four features. He is best known here for the group of pictures that began in 1949 with *Late Spring* and concluded with *An Autumn Afternoon* in 1962. Couched in differing subtleties, these later films share, in some degree, one quality. The poet and dance critic Edwin Denby said often that what he prized most in ballet was stillness, which I take to mean the recovery through motion of a resident serenity, an apprehension behind the dancing of quiet pure existence. This view relates to Ozu. The best among his last films, *Tokyo Story*, has a certain stillness behind all that we see and hear, a hushed apprehension of human mystery.

This earlier film we now see is not anywhere near the later films in depth, but it clearly was made by the same man. Ozu had previously made a surprising variety of films—he was then a contract director working for a studio—and he had intended this one, too, to be another comedy. The American film critic and historian Donald Richie, long resident in Tokyo, reports that Ozu said he had planned the film as “a fairly bright little story, but it changed while I was working on it.” The titles credit the original idea to James Maki, who, says Richie, was really Ozu.

The film is silent. (Sound came belatedly to Japan.) A score, mostly piano, has been recorded with this new print. The cinematography is dated. But the film breathes from its first moments. A couple in their thirties, with two sons of about ten and eight, are moving to the suburbs of a city. We first see a wheel spinning in the dirt: a small pickup truck, loaded with household stuff, is stuck. The father of the family keeps cranking the engine to start it, and it is only when the two boys jump off and push that the truck moves. Afterward, we can see that this small family action is a hint.

The neighborhood is somewhat grim, flat, brown, scarcely settled, the whole region crossed by tracks for trolley cars that speed along. The family has moved here because the father has a job with a company whose headquarters are nearby, and the boss has urged him to move into the area. They all visit the boss, a man about the father’s age, who is very cordial, and amid the customary flurry of bowing, they are welcomed.

Their life begins out here. The father goes to work, the mother housekeeps. The boys set off for school, but they do not get there. A bunch of local boys, with a chief bully, molests them, and they falter. In fact, they become truants, fairly often. The father, however, is snug in his office routine, where, bowing and obedient, he gets along. (Surprisingly, the door to the boss’s office is labeled “private” in English.)

Ozu is building a structure of parallels: the boys in their society, the father in his. At one point the camera travels down a long line of desks with workers and soon travels down a line of somewhat less docile schoolchildren at their desks. The boys’ truancy is discovered: the father asks them why they do it and encourages them to take their rightful places. The brothers note their father’s servility and ask him why he bows and scrapes to his boss. At a party the father even makes funny faces for the boss so that he can be laughed at. He then explains gently to his sons that he needs the job, needs the money, so that they can go to school and can eat. This doesn’t encourage their school attendance and also leads to their hunger strike—an attempt to relieve their father. Both sets of troubles move to a conclusion.

The performances are all pleasing, familiar in the sense that we know these people. Ozu shows here the gift for handling children that was often manifested in his work. Even more marked are the elements that seem to forecast *Tokyo Story*, far-off though it still was. First, there is the family as the unit of experience, the vehicle in which, happily or otherwise, people move on. Part of that unit, quietly powerful, is the gap-and-closure between parents and children. And the trolleys, too, are thematic:

they move constantly in the background, sometimes closer. In *Tokyo Story*, which mostly takes place in a seaside town, ships pass frequently. The idea of passage is inherent. Even these dinky trolleys in this early work seem to imply, “Worry if you must. You too will pass.”

Reviews (Books)

Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II (Cambridge University Press, 336 pp.)

21 May 2001

The term “anti-Semitism” was coined by a German journalist named Wilhelm Marr in a pamphlet attacking Jewish participation in politics. That was in 1873, which is odd. What had the phenomenon been called through all the preceding centuries? Almost two thousand years earlier, Josephus cited it as recognizable during the Egyptian exile even earlier. Strange that an animus of such longevity had to wait so long for a convenient tag.

Whatever it was previously called, it has survived. History demonstrates that, whatever its degree of visibility, anti-Semitism has persisted—in Western societies, anyway—at least since the dispersion of the Jews. It waxes and wanes, for reasons that generally have little to do with Jewish behavior; but even in the most equanimous societies, sometimes in those with few or no Jews in them, only the insistently wide-eyed could maintain that no amount of delving would uncover a streak of the virus. The reasons for this persistent animosity have often been explored, but no exploration has led to its disappearance.

Since it has been in some measure omnipresent, it arrived in America with the first Europeans. Amid the Dutch settlers, as Michael Kammen reports in *People of Paradox*, a clergyman was concerned about what would happen “if the obstinate and immovable Jews came to settle there.” When the United States was founded, its Constitution enounced sterling egalitarian principles, but who would maintain that they have been invariably followed? Not the “obstinate and immovable Jews.” (The American tolerance of slavery is another contradiction, and another story.)

American enterprise flourished through the nineteenth century, and since Jewish Americans were busy in many of its industries, anti-Semitism became a component of the American ethos. Anyone who doubts this can look at issues of *Life* (I mean the original humorous magazine of that name) around the beginning of the twentieth century. For the modern reader, the shock is not only the viciousness of the anti-Semitic jokes, but also the fact that they were accepted—more, expected. (Recall the attitudes tacitly surrounding Simon Rosedale in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, which is set at about that time.)

Through the nineteenth century, Jews became prominent in the American theater business, and Steven Alan Carr’s book reproduces cartoons about Jewish producers that would have made Goebbels envious. When film was invented, Jews were among the earliest entrepreneurs in every branch of what quickly grew into the film industry. Anti-Semitism exploded. The theater now became, in popular effect, a lesser part of the American cultural scene, and the fact that Jews so quickly were prominent in this overwhelming new power provoked something near to frenzy in the press and even the pulpit. The virus was ready, so to speak, and waiting—this new stimulant propelled it. Carr’s book, though he doesn’t emphasize this aspect, is in essence the history of a twentieth-century epidemic derived from an ancient venom. The ancient bile, newly simmered, spewed into channels of the whole American social landscape.

Hollywood and anti-Semitism is intensely researched and sensibly weighed. Carr begins his account with what he calls “the Gabler paradox.” This is the

contradiction that underlies Neal Gabler's valuable study *An Empire of Their Own*, which appeared in 1988. In his introduction, Gabler observed:

The paradox is that the American film industry . . . was founded and for more than thirty years operated by Eastern European Jews who themselves seemed to be anything but the quintessence of America. . . . While the Hollywood Jews were being assailed by know-nothings for conspiring against traditional American values and the power structure that maintained them, they were desperately embracing those values and working to enter the power structure.

Gabler principally investigated Hollywood figures and their society. Carr broadens his inquiry to examine larger social and political evidences, around the country, of the peculiar animus resulting from the Gabler paradox: how these very Jews who were trying to be ultra-American provoked American hatred.

As an instrument for his inquiry Carr devised a concept that he calls "the Hollywood Question"—a phrase with which he wishes to update that venerable and troublesome phrase "the Jewish Question." The latter, he says, is a term that "in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century . . . articulated a problem: given their cultural and religious differences, should Jews enjoy the same basic rights as everyone else?" He says that the Hollywood Question is "not a garden variety of anti-Semitism," that such a diagnosis fails to understand "the full impact of the Question." I am unable to see that Carr's book benefits to any great degree by his change of name; but whatever the term, the results of his inquiry are vivid, disgusting, and enlightening.

His work is in three parts, dividing the 1880-1941 span of the book into chronological segments. Here I cite examples from all three parts of the areas into which Carr has traced the rush of the anti-Semitism caused by Hollywood. Part One covers the period from 1880 to 1929. The years before the arrival of film, in 1895, set the tumid scene. After film's arrival, the first explosion was in the subject of sex—not so much sex on the screen as behind it and around it. Sex is so dominant an element in films, however chaste, and the presence of attractive women is so essential, that Hollywood's *odore di femmina* quickly infuriated the ready-to-roll haters. This sexual obsession had festered viciously enough about Jews as theater producers; but because films were exponentially so much more invasive of privacy and fantasy, the presence of Jews at the source of these invasions was especially intolerable. Lovely gentile maidens in the paws of ape-like Jewish studio chiefs: this was too much.

Oligarchy came soon after sex. Jewish business control of films excluded others (it was claimed) and allegedly fostered Jewish warpings of the truth, and this "fact" galvanized virulent elements in the pulpit as well as the press. (With an ancient spurious logic, this Jewish prominence was also attacked because it was disproportionate to the Jewish percentage of the immigrant population—less than two percent in 1910.) The real fact that the majority of American films were wrapped in cookie-cutter, red-white-and-blue virtues mattered little to those clergymen and editors who were hungry to hate.

One especially bitter instance was the behavior of the Catholic Church. In the nineteenth century, American Catholics, especially the Irish, had been constantly affronted by the Protestant majority. (As late as the late 1920s, when I was a boy working summers on upstate New York farms, if I made a mistake I was called "you Irishman.") Still, when the chance came to Catholics to use comparable tactics on others, they seized it. Admittedly they were in some degree heated by Irish

stereotypes in films, but these only opened the floodgates of long-stored Catholic hatred of Jews. (This subject has only recently come in for wide discussion.) Early-twentieth-century Catholic organizations and churchmen attacked pictures that they said were produced by “foreign-born Jews of the lowest sort.” In 1927, for example, Jewish-owned studios presented *The Callahans and the Murphys*, about feuding tenement families, and *Irish Hearts*, about immigrant romance—two sentimental films that Catholic groups assailed as ethnic caricature.

Congress itself found time to debate the Jewishness of the film world. In 1926, after a Ku Klux Klan newspaper fumed (without specification) about the way that “certain Jew pictures” ridiculed “the Protestant ministry of the land,” Representative W. B. Shaw of Georgia testified to the same effect before a federal hearing. The heat was heated further by *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the malicious forgery about Jews that arrived here shortly after World War I. A grating oddity: *The Protocols* assailed Jews for their radicalism, not for their capitalist greed, and one result of this new angle of attack was to link Jews with the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. The arrest and eventual execution of those two men in 1927, says Carr, “attested to a fear of radicalism and anarchy that extended to almost any foreigner, but especially Jewish immigrants.”

In part two, dealing with the years from 1929 to 1941, Carr examines the ways in which the Question was linked with the Depression, communism, and the approach of World War II:

Throughout the 1930s the stereotype of the Jewish movie mogul implicitly addressed crises representative of New Deal concerns. The immoral, leering, hook-nosed, cigar-chomping executive became yet another enthymeme of the Hollywood Question—a lament for an older traditional order and a protest against a newer, urban, diverse, and global one. For many surviving the crisis of the Great Depression, the movie mogul explained a great deal about what had happened and was happening in America.

An outstanding figure in this mode of Jews-as-whipping-boys was the “Radio Priest,” Father Charles Coughlin of Detroit, who in the 1930s was estimated to have an audience of more than thirty million weekly listeners. To increase his audience, Coughlin indicted Jews for their influence on America’s foreign policy, especially for their softness, as he saw it, on communism. American films, he held, were insufficiently anti-communist (all the while that those pathetic Hollywood producers were sweating to be Yankee Doodles in extremis). Sanctimoniously Coughlin would speak of his “fellow Jews” but asked, despite the Gabler paradox, why movies poured “pitiless propaganda upon the silver screen of our nation to deceive us.” I can still hear Coughlin’s smarmy voice distinguishing between good Jews and “bahd” Jews.

My memory was jogged again by the name of William Dudley Pelley, whose face and prattle were once familiar to newspaper readers and newsreel viewers. Pelley began as a journalist, then went to Hollywood in the 1920s and wrote screenplays, some of them based on his own novels and stories. Several of his screenplays were produced, including *The Shock*, which starred Lon Chaney. But after some reverses in Hollywood and a nervous breakdown, Pelley organized a fascist group called the Silver Shirts and founded a magazine called *Liberation*, which was furiously anti-Semitic. He scorched the “controlled” press, replete with what he called “Jewspapers,” and of course attacked Jewish control of the film studios where he had once worked. What chills even in retrospect is the fact that Pelley and Coughlin and

similar others were at the time regarded by many simply as part of the American scene. Comparable minds and mouths exist today, of course, and they have their listeners and readers, but such figures are not now usually treated merely as nutty curiosities.

The American air today is much clearer of these fumings. And what helped to clear it, to a very considerable degree? Irony past the ironic. There arrived in Europe the worst ill wind of the century, which nonetheless blew some good. It is a dreadful but ineluctable fact, as Carr shows, that the rise of Hitler in Europe gradually ameliorated anti-Semitism in this country, at least in its public manifestations. True, as late as 1941 a congressman such as John Rankin could contend that Jewish bankers had “created Hitler”; but as early as 1935 *Fortune*, in an article by Archibald MacLeish, contended that “anti-Semitism in America, judged by its exponents, is a very sick donkey.” Certainly the donkey still lived, but it was increasingly seen as a donkey.

The donkey stumbles on into Carr’s Part Three, “1941 and Beyond.” In 1941, Charles Lindbergh, a fervent isolationist, said:

Instead of agitating for war, the Jewish groups of this country should be opposing it in every possible way. . . . The greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government.

This seemed a warning that if this country entered the war, Jews would be blamed and persecuted. Yet at the same time, owing to the rise of fascism in Europe, Carr says that in America “outright anti-Semitism could prove a political liability, rather than galvanizing rhetoric.” Carr cites Leo Rosten’s 1941 book *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* as one of the turning points. Among its many clarifications, Rosten addresses the derision of the founders as refugees from the garment business: “In no other industry is humble origin interpreted as a skeleton in the closet rather than proof of admirable success.” (In the 1930s J. B. Priestley had described Hollywood producers as “tailors become caliphs.”)

Another large index of an atmospheric change, inversely pleasant, came in novels by Nathanael West, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Budd Schulberg, “which rehabilitated the Shylock Jew as part of a larger critique of the American Dream, locating this stereotype not in some Other but within the very fabric of American life.” In other words, it was now possible for authors to treat Jewish characters candidly, without seeming or intending to seem anti-Semitic. (By the time Herman Wouk’s novel *Marjorie Morningstar* became a best-seller in 1955—the heroine’s name had originally been Morgenstern—the topical joke was that Wouk’s book made it chic to be Jewish.)

In 1941, the year of the Lindbergh speech quoted above, the Senate began its Hearings on Motion Picture Propaganda, headed by the isolationist Gerald P. Nye. Carr writes: “The hearings were, in fact a showdown between a traditional, isolationist America and a modern New Deal, interventionist America. The Propaganda Hearings also marked a decisive shift in the popular perception of Hollywood.” The end result was in some measure an acknowledgment of the Gabler paradox, because of the terrible world situation: “the Jewish movie moguls represented a new kind of ethnic agency, ardently defending the principles of America’s founding fathers.”

Everything thereafter was not—never will be—roses all the way. Carr even makes a case that the epochal consent decrees of 1947, with which the federal government forced the film studios to divest themselves of the theaters that they owned, had some basis in anti-Jewish feeling. Another wormy sector bulged out of post-war anti-communism, which became an acceptable, even laudable means of being anti-Semitic because so many on the left were Jewish.

Still, the experience of World War II certainly improved matters. American films began to treat Jewish characters not only as sympathetic figures but as principals. Says Carr: “Both *Crossfire* (RKO, 1946) and *Gentleman’s Agreement* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947) condemned anti-Semitism, not because of its prevalence, but because of its aberration. As both films suggest, anti-Semitism operated distinctively at odds with democratic ideals.” With *The Diary of Anne Frank* in 1959 Hollywood—for the first time—even “treated the Holocaust by focusing on anti-Semitism.” Today the situation is so completely revised that it may be difficult for some to believe that the conditions in Carr’s book prevailed so widely for so long. Today it would be impossible to make a film for general release in which a Jew was lampooned as a Jew, and today few public figures ululate in anti-Semitic rhetoric.

Extremities on the political-religious right and some racial panjandrums remind us that this country is not purged of anti-Semitism, but we have only to consider the success of Woody Allen to recognize that today a Jew can even satirize himself with reliance on the audience’s view of him as a fellow citizen, not a member of a lower order. Then consider the name, simply the name, Dustin Hoffman. It would have been impossible for a star to use that name in the earliest film years. When an actor who was born Douglas Ulman began his career early in the last century, he became Douglas Fairbanks.

How blameless were the Jews through all those decades of vituperation? Completely. To cite vulgarity or greed or misbehavior on the part of some Hollywood producers, to find one iota of justification for the slime, is to destroy opposition to the slime. To venture an immense, infernal comparison, it would be like conceding that some of the Jews sent to Auschwitz were despicable people. That must be true. What difference does it make?

Although Carr doesn’t stress the matter, his book makes one point stubbornly clear: Jewish “domination” of an industry, if and when it happens, is neither to be masked nor apologized for. Jews founded and dominated the American film industry, yes: why didn’t others? Why didn’t others at least give them sizable competition? (Spyros Skouras was one, but how many others?) Since that did not happen, it was inevitable, in the historical view, that anti-Semitism would well up. The best response to the “charge” of Jewish prominence is a simple fact: it was true.

Carr’s research opens new corners and highlights old ones. (One slip: Edward G. Robinson played an Italian gangster in *Little Caesar*, not in *The Public Enemy*.) His writing is serviceable, except when he tries to make it fancy. (“The cultural margins were quickly migrating toward the center of popularity.”) But his book establishes a grimly fascinating and uncomfortably close chapter in the long history of a curse.

My First Feature: Twenty Celebrated Directors Talk about Their First Film (Pantheon, 458 pp.)

4 June 2001

Few books are born out of panic, but Stephen Lowenstein writes in his introduction that panic was the genesis of his book. Several years ago he was about to start directing his first film, a short: "On the first day of the shoot I awoke at around five-thirty in the morning . . . in a state of blind panic." Later he wrote an article about the experience, then thought: "If it had been worth writing about the experience of making a small film, I realized that it would be worth recording the experiences of those whose debut feature films had made a splash and had launched their careers as filmmakers on the world stage." Hence *My First Feature*.

Lowenstein's book consists of interviews with twenty directors, well known and less known, on the subject of their first features. (The two Coen brothers are counted as one director.) Lowenstein, who lives in London, has worked on television documentaries and has made two short films of his own, so he was sufficiently experienced to ask germane questions that drew open responses—about his subjects' beginnings in the profession, how they were enabled to proceed, what the debut experience was like, what the results were. Of course no twenty interviews could be equally interesting; but there are spots of interest even in the slighter ones, most of them are better than that, and three of them are exceptional.

Lowenstein foresaw that he would have to ask some of the same questions of each person, so he took care to vary the approach and to let other questions, specific to the individual, grow out of the replies. The answers to the recurrent questions are surprising in two ways: in the degree to which they agree and in the degree to which they differ. Here is a sampling of the more unusual responses to some of the recurrent questions. (The films that I have cited for each director are subsequent work, not debut films.)

On youthful filmgoing. "I started going to the cinema in 1944 when I was three. . . . At school they would show you a film every Saturday, and repeat it on Sunday. So in fact, this was making me a rather informed scholar without my even being aware of it." (Stephen Frears, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Dangerous Liaisons*.) "I loved what I saw, but the idea that I could ultimately get to do that didn't occur to me. If you're growing up in Baltimore, who in the world is going to go into the film business?" (Barry Levinson, *Rain Man* and *Avalon*.) "We saw a lot of them [in Taiwan]. Mainly Hollywood and Chinese movies. . . . [But] I never really got into film until I failed my college examinations." (Ang Lee, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.) "I wasn't one of those people who grew up knowing I was a filmmaker. . . . I grew up in a small town, with one cinema, that was remote even in Indian terms. . . . At the age of twenty I found out what I wanted to do in my life." (Mira Nair, *Salaam Bombay!* and *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*.)

Financing the first film. "It amazes me that any film gets made. Especially an independent film, because the bottom can drop out at any moment." (Steve Buscemi, *The Animal Factory*.) "Sam Raimi [the producer] had gone from dentist to dentist and local physicians to raise money." (Kevin Smith, *Clerks* and *Chasing Amy*.)

Technical knowledge at the start. "Non-existent, basically. I hadn't got a clue about lenses. Zoom, prime lenses meant nothing to me." (Neil Jordan, *Michael Collins* and *The End of the Affair*.) "You say, let's do this. Then you take a look in the lens and see." (Levinson.)

Arrival on the set for the first time. “I remember Ethan and I driving to the set on the first day and both being impressed by the number of trucks.” (Joel Coen, *Fargo* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) “God Almighty, all these trucks! They were all over the lot and I went ‘Oh my God!’ I think that got me more than anything else. Trucks!” (Levinson.)

Confidence on the first day. “I didn’t feel confident at all. But then I never feel confident.” (Ken Loach, *Riff-Raff* and *Raining Stones*.) “I felt in a real state of panic. But then you learn you just have to get on with it and make the thing.” (Jordan.) “We were just about to go and [an actor] said, ‘Are you nervous?’ I said, ‘I am absolutely terrified.’ He said, ‘Good. Never forget that.’” (Mike Figgis, *The Browning Version* and *Miss Julie*.)

Anecdotes glint throughout the book. Mike Figgis recounts how Tommy Lee Jones, who was in Figgis’s first picture, compared the length of his trailer with Melanie Griffith’s and wryly noted that hers was a foot longer. Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*) was born into “a large extended Italian family” and says, “I’d come from this background of noise, very warm and typically Italian. The one thing I absolutely remember about the first day [of shooting] was being surrounded by what seemed to be hundreds of people . . . and I thought, I feel quite comfortable with all this noise. Suddenly I was a boy sitting on my parents’ kitchen table.”

The three interviews that are most rewarding are by three of the most individualistic directors in the book. (Oliver Stone is their peer in this respect, but his interview is short and relatively gaunt.) Frears tells how he was first enamored of the theater, began directing plays at Cambridge, and eventually connected with the Royal Court Theatre in its highest days. Then Lindsay Anderson of that theater assigned him to be assistant to the filmmaker Karel Reisz, who was directing a play, after which Reisz invited Frears to assist him on a film. This interview is not only a biopsic slice of the teeming English theater-film life in the 1950s and 1960s, it is an odd reversal of Lindsay Anderson’s career. Anderson began in film, then was brought to the Royal Court; for Frears it was just the opposite. Pedro Almodóvar (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Dark Habits*) makes a grand show these days of being glib and glossy. His best films are wittily yet almost lovingly anarchic, the work of a man who determined that the best course of dealing with the world is to ridicule it without forsaking it. The story of his long and grueling metamorphosis from his origin as an ignorant village kid to eminence as a sophisticated Madrid satirist discloses a courage that one might have thought he would be embarrassed to admit. Bertrand Tavernier (*Let Joy Reign Supreme* and *The Judge and the Assassin*) is distinguished in this book for one strong reason: his first film is a masterpiece. *The Clockmaker* shines on the roster of the best postwar French films. Tavernier’s story of how he made his way toward it, through years of work as a film publicist, through years of passionate cinephilia, is especially engrossing because we are watching a premier artist achieve empowerment.

This struggle is an epitome of the book. Beneath all the replies jocular and grave, the anecdotes, the professional details, these twenty interviews are in some measure accounts of heroism. Whatever the measure of talent in a director, whatever the ultimate results of his struggle, the strictures of our society—cultural and financial—initially present an iron door to him on which is written: “Be superhuman. Or forget it.” In our society every artist is an agonist; but the agon is harder for the artist who depends on others and on considerable money for the fulfillment of his work—outstandingly, the playwright, the composer, the architect, the filmmaker.

Lowenstein's book is, in a way, reassuring. These twenty people are only a few of our contemporaries who were willing to face what had to be faced, and they are (we are entitled to hope) an even smaller fraction of those who will come.

As envoi, an old Hollywood story. In 1947 Joseph Losey, who later made *The Servant* and *Accident*, was engaged to direct his first feature. He had been greatly experienced in the theater and in short films, but he was extremely nervous about this feature. On the day before he was to begin, he confessed his nervousness to Dore Schary, the producer who had engaged him. "Tomorrow," advised Schary, "after the first take of your first shot, say, 'Print it.' No matter whether it's good or bad or whatever, just say, 'Print it.'" "But why?" asked Losey. "Because," said Schary, "from then on everyone will think that you know what you're doing."

The Fifth Act (The New Press, 152 pp.)

13 August 2001

When I was teaching courses in the history of film style, I naturally included an Ingmar Bergman film, usually *Persona*. In one class where *Persona* was to be shown, I spoke a bit about it, then the projectionist started the film. After ten minutes or so, the projector jammed. I apologized to the class, and the film was started again. At just about the same spot, the projector jammed again, and I apologized again. One young woman put up her hand. "Please stop apologizing," she said. "Seeing those ten minutes twice let me see that Bergman isn't just a great director, he's a great writer." The projector worked fine the third time, but I couldn't be too sorry about those two glitches because they evoked that wonderful remark.

A new book by Bergman made me remember it. The New Press has just published *The Fifth Act*, which contains a preface, called "Monologue," and three screenplays. Bergman eventually made films of all three, and two of them have been shown here, but this is the first publication of the material in the United States. The book's title sounds as if Bergman were ringing down the curtain—it was first published in Sweden in 1994, when he was seventy-six—but this closure obviously applies only to his directing career; he has kept on writing. He has published several books, some of which he adapted for the screen for others to direct (*Sunday's Children*, *The Best Intentions*, *Private Confessions*). In 1987 and 1990 he published two volumes of autobiography, the first of which, *The Magic Lantern*, is a major work, on the level of his major films. That young woman in my class was right: Bergman needs to be recognized as a writer as well as a director, and this new volume proves it further.

The "Monologue" begins:

The lights come up. Close-up of an older gray-bearded man. During a long silence he regards his invisible audience. He begins to speak in fits and starts. He is no speaker.

Perhaps not, but he is obviously a dramatist—in more than one sense, a self-dramatist. He then tells us what reading has always meant to him. Although he is a slow reader, he says that slowness has been a professional advantage. His first encounter with a dramatic text that he was to direct was always slow and allowed him to "decide on a staging at the first confrontation."

He recounts how in 1940 he began to write plays and how these plays led to employment as a screenwriter (a “script peon” is his term). He succeeded in this new work. “My way into short stories, novels and drama was hermetically sealed. Only film remained.” If I made marginal notes, I would have written “Hurrah” there. (Not quite incidentally, this master director tells us that he has been deaf in his right ear since his military service and that his right eye is legally blind. But “in the performance of my profession, I am capable, untiring, orderly.” Who disagrees?)

All three of the screenplays in the book address the subjects of theater and film. The one that means the least to me, which I had seen as a film, is the third, *In the Presence of a Clown*. It opens in a psychiatric hospital in 1925. The clown of the title is Death, who is female, in circus dress, and who observes much of the action throughout. The mode is interplay between double personality in a patient and the double life that film provides *vis-à-vis* reality. A film within the film is to be shown with sound—in 1925 this meant actors speaking behind the screen—but the plan has to be abandoned, and this interior film is performed as a play. The tone of the entire screenplay is wry, rather than grim. (Someone says of a man who is a drinker that “since his wife left, he’s got worse.” Reply: “On the contrary! Now that he is drinking uninhibitedly he’s become quite coherent.”) But the apparatus of the screenplay is unwieldy, and the serious elements are themes that Bergman had often treated subtly and that here are italicized.

The middle piece is *The Last Scream: A Slightly Skewed Morality Tale*. It is short—a one-act play that was done on stage before it was filmed—and deals fictionally with two real personages of Swedish film in 1919, a producer named Charles Magnusson and a director named Georg af Klercker. The scene is Magnusson’s office. Klercker barrels in full of brio and bonhomie, and in a fourteen-page speech he strips off layer after layer of pretense as he maneuvers for a job, until he ends up on his knees begging. That speech is a tour de force—raunchy, spiteful, brave, desolate—and it includes a pathetic prank. I haven’t seen the film, but Christopher Plummer or Albert Finney would scintillate in the speech. Fundamentally it is not mere bravura: it is an apotheosis of the filmmaker’s dependence on the businessman, of art’s reliance on capital. (It reminded me that in 1951, just to keep going before he became a name, Bergman wrote and directed nine soap commercials.)

The first piece in the book, *After the Rehearsal*, is the gem. A masterpiece. Bergman says in the monologue that the career difficulties he describes “were what made me into a passable professional. Other factors have also played a role, and all of that can be found, by the way, in *After the Rehearsal*, which is an honest attempt to be honest.” Nonsense. Honesty is easy: any writer with a conscience can be honest. It takes a master like Bergman to perceive that honesty is only one kind of mask or solace, to utilize different perceptions of honesty, to understand that confusion and bewilderment are at the core of truth-seeking. All these elements are in *After the Rehearsal*.

Bergman’s medium for his investigation here is the theater: an aging director, a young actress, and her mother, who was also an actress and who appears in what is a flashback of sorts since she is dead. They are all on the stage of an empty theater. The older woman was once the director’s mistress, the younger one is herself tempted, and so is he, though he isn’t pursuing her. The intersectings of truth and of simulated truth, the collisions and unions and divorces of ego, the musk of sex, sought and needed rather than feared or endured—all are braided in this exquisitely written trio. This piece fixes the ambiance of the theater but goes beyond it to invade us all, to braid desire and time and reticent nobility. (Brief quotation is pointless; long

quotation, impractical.) I don't think that I exaggerate in suggesting that *After the Rehearsal* would not be unworthy of Chekhov.

It is not a drama, said some when the film of the piece appeared here. This is true enough in an orthodox sense. It is, however, the sort of drama that meditation brings to the sentient—meditation and memory. The center of the piece is the director, and although it all takes place literally after a rehearsal on this stage, the title can be seen as figurative, with everything that has happened so far in his life as a rehearsal for what is to come—life itself as continuing rehearsal for what is ahead.

About the translations. *In the Presence of a Clown* was done by the late Joan Tate, revised by Jonathan Mair. All the other material was translated by Linda Haverty Rugg into lithe English that nonetheless suggests origin in a foreign language, an ideal combination. It is much to the point of Bergman as writer to note that the text of *After the Rehearsal* is more elaborate than the dialogue in the film (whose subtitles were not done by Rugg). Viewing the tape, anyone can see that the actors are speaking less than what is published here. But no printed Bergman screenplay that I know corresponds exactly to the film made of it. (The children in this film, for further instance, are not in the published screenplay.) For a variety of reasons, alterations in a script are usual during the making of a film. But the fact that Bergman has published a much more full version of this screenplay implies that he wants to be considered doubly, as filmmaker and as writer. To read *After the Rehearsal*, after looking again at a tape of this beautiful film, is to celebrate the idea.

In the Blink of an Eye (Silman-James Press, 146 pp.)

10 December 2001

Walter Murch, one of the best of film editors, has published a second edition of his invaluable book *In the Blink of an Eye*. First issued in 1995, it is both a technician's and a thinker's comments on the crucial, little-discussed process of editing. (The great Soviet director Pudovkin said that "the foundation of film art is editing.") Murch has added thirty-two pages to his book. Since 1995 he has edited, along with other films, *The English Patient* and the restorations of *Touch of Evil* and *Apocalypse Now*, and has done this work digitally. He has "completely re-written and considerably expanded the digital editing section" of his book "as we begin cinema's second century."

Three immediate points. First: like the original book, the additional material is not technically thick: anyone who can use a computer can understand it completely. Second: Murch is not much concerned with the digitalization of special effects and performances and projection. He concentrates on editing. Third: he can write with flavor. Anyone who cares about film can not only profit from this book but can actually enjoy it.

Basically, the difference between the old method of editing and the digital process is that the digital editor need never actually touch a foot of the film. No more clipping and pasting and storage problems. Every one of the takes of a film is entered in a computer, and every frame in those takes is given a number. The editor can then sit at the computer and summon whatever he wants to see, can arrange and re-arrange, eliminate and add, much more easily, I would say, than a writer can revise text. This process must help the editor's flexibility of vision, his sense of structure, his chances for variation.

Some samples of Murch's thought:

The human imagination is able to recognize ideas more powerfully than we can articulate them. When you are in a foreign country, you can always understand more of the language than you can speak. To a certain extent, every film that you make is a foreign country, and first you have to learn the language of that “country.” Every film has (or should have) a unique way of communicating, and so you struggle to learn its language.

Murch then explains how digital editing helps the process.

He has a special vantage point from which to view the much-mooted comparison between television and film:

Television is a “look-at” medium, while cinema is a “look-into” medium. You can think of the television screen as a surface that the eye hits and then bounces back. The trick with electronic editing, of course, is that since you are watching television monitors, you must somehow convince yourself that these are cinematic screens. You must make “look at” become “look into.”

For Murch, film is not merely an added means for entertainment, for storytelling, it is a signal event in the rendering of human consciousness:

The film is a dramatic construction in which for the first time in history, characters can be seen to think at even the subtlest level, and these thoughts can then be choreographed. . . . This is made possible by two techniques that lie at the foundation of cinema itself: the close-up, which renders such subtlety visible, and the cut—the sudden switch from one image to another—which mimics the acrobatic nature of thought itself.

Intrusively perhaps, I would add a third technique: the sound track, which enables an actor to speak without visibly speaking and thus does away with the traditional soliloquy.

All in all, Murch’s book is like being taken into the confidence of a man on the inside, who knows what he is talking about, has thought about what he knows, and can express himself.

Never Coming to a Theater Near You (PublicAffairs, 416 pp.)

7 February 2005

A letter from a reader in the Pacific Northwest asks wryly: “Do you invent some of the films you write about?” The question prompted a Borgesian temptation to invent, but I was soon calmed down by a sober fact—hardly new, still sobering. The reader’s faintly desolate question underscored it. In terms of filmgoing possibilities, this country is schizoid. I, in New York, confront a fairly full range of available films. Only in a few large cities is anything like that range available; and those cities are only a small slice of this country’s possible audience. Most people, like that reader, have the chance to see only the major Hollywood products—not even all the American films, let alone foreign ones.

This dismal fact ought not to make us romanticize. If Kiarostami and Tavernier and Zhang Yimou were as widely available as *The Lord of the Rings*, they

would not attract a sliver of the same attendance, which is obviously why they don't have the same distribution. But doesn't that sliver deserve nourishment? The possible nourishment exists. Year after year films are being made for more people than have the chance to see them. And if the whole idea of filmmaking is as serious as some of us take it to be, this gap between film and viewers is a cultural crime.

Aptly, a recent book by Kenneth Turan, film critic of the *Los Angeles Times* and National Public Radio, is titled *Never Coming to a Theater Near You: A Celebration of a Certain Kind of Movie*, a collection of his reviews of films that have not been widely shown. He says that in his twelve-year experience

I've noticed an increasing disconnect between the films I recommend person-to-person because they've meant the most to me and the ones most people have managed to see. The pressures to experience the blockbusters of the moment are too great and the time that smaller films remain on screens is so finite (the good really do die young in this business). . . . In theory, the wide reach of videos and DVDs makes it possible for viewers to catch up on the films they've missed, but in practical terms ... most people blank out on the names of features they've been meaning to see and reach for whatever's handiest.

His book is meant as a reminder list.

Naturally Turan's list is not precisely what mine would be. I would have included *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*, by Jill Sprecher, and *The Designated Mourner*, by David Hare, to name just two overlooked gems. But the disparity between what is available to only a few and what reaches the many is more than a game of matching one critic's favorites against another's. Nor will it suffice to fix the blame on the money concerns of theater owners. Of course those money concerns are stringent. (Orson Welles once said that anyone who talks about films and doesn't mention money is a jackass.) Theater owners are not philanthropists, and their refusal to book most of the films that I'm aching about is perfectly reasonable. The real trouble, the basic problem, is deeper.

Harold Rosenberg, who in his time did a good deal of lecturing around the country, once described the cultural situation in America, apart from the biggest cities, as a wilderness dotted with stockades. Those stockades were mostly the lively colleges and universities. In my own lecturing days, I found Rosenberg's comment a shade too reductive but healthily blunt. Radio and television and paperbound books and, latterly, the Internet were all regarded for a time as chances for cultural spread. Little proof of this is so far forthcoming. The reverse could easily be argued: that these increments have chiefly given more power to those who have no interest in, say, Jill Sprecher.

For me, a chilling sign of the gravity of this cultural situation comes from the recent presidential election. Political experts tell us that Bush got his majority from what is called the heartland, that the two coasts were more favorable to Kerry. As one who still gapes at the re-election on moral values of a man who led us into a war because of mass-destructive weapons that do not exist, I can't help feeling that at the root of the political thud is a blankness that culture could lighten. The factual ignorance—40 percent of the electorate still believe that the weapons are there—would be less likely in a public of greater sophistication. This is hardly to say that Hare and Sprecher and their kin could have got Kerry elected; but it is certainly to say that those films and hundreds more at their level of ambition might have sharpened

some people, made them less ready to accept like hungry puppies whatever was fed them. For decades many of us have been hoping that the stockades would have more of a radiating effect on the territory around them. We're still hoping.

Why, then, do critics—at least on some magazines and newspapers—continue to review films that will probably not reach wide audiences? For myself, it is partly because, as a democrat, I believe that the rights of the minority must be respected, including the filmgoing minority. It would be an offense to that minority, whether or not they knew it, to omit reviews, positive or otherwise, of films that are part of contemporary culture and of value to their cultural conspectus. (And we can hope that critics of the Turan bent may stimulate a demand to which theaters can afford to respond.) Equally importantly, it would be an offense to the art of film to ignore those who, often through much travail, keep reaching upward. I don't think that seriously intended films will save this sorry world, but I do think that their absence, even ignorance that they exist, would make it sorrier.

50 Designers/50 Costumes: Concept to Character (University of California Press, 124 pp.)

22 August 2005

"Film costumes serve two equal purposes: to support the narrative by creating memorable characters, and to provide balance within the frame by using color, texture, and silhouette. . . . All clothing used in a fictional film is considered costume, enriched by a magnified theatrical scale, through which a heightened reality is utilized to reveal the nature of each character." These statements, not novel but often forgotten by audiences, are from the introduction to *50 Designers/50 Costumes: Concept to Character*, the catalogue of an exhibition held last year in Beverly Hills at the Gallery of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Each of the fifty designers gets two pages: the left side for background on the costume that he or she has chosen, the right side for a photograph of the costume along with the original design. The book, a large paperbound (distributed by the University of California Press), is attractive and enlightening.

Naturally the designs that first catch the eye are historical or fantasy costumes—for instance, the beguiling ball gown done for Catherine Zeta-Jones in *The Mask of Zorro*. For the designer Graciela Mazon, it was more than beguiling. The character, Elena, is an isolated woman who is going to meet the young Zorro at a ball. "They have a passionate dance," says Mazon, "a mixture of tango and traditional music, and it was possible to create some fire between them with this vibrant dress."

Historical costume sometimes strives for verity rather than glamour. In *Cold Mountain*, Nicole Kidman played a genteel young woman fallen on hard times. Says the designer Ann Roth: "Her clothes deteriorate and, for instance, a beautifully quilted taffeta petticoat originally worn over the hoop skirt to soften the effect of bones, now becomes [which we see] a warm skirt worn over a manure-spotted pair of her father's trousers."

A chief value of the book is what it tells us about non-historical, non-fantastic costume design—just clothes for people, which, as the introduction notes, become costumes when they are in a film. An instance is the outfit that Dustin Hoffman wore as a contemporary lawyer in *Runaway Jury*. The designer Abigail Murray decided not to put Hoffman in a conventional suit: "I chose to put Dustin in a jacket, vest, pants,

shirt, all totally mismatched but all in the same warm tones. . . . It gave him a look that made him ‘court presentable.’” The photo appeals.

An especially interesting commentary comes from Albert Wolsky, who did the costumes for *Road to Perdition*, a picture set in the 1930s. “This particular Depression period had thick and heavy coarse fabrics,” he writes. “Nothing looked or felt right or moved the way it should.” Wolsky had fabrics made. “Samples would go back and forth until we could arrive at the right weight, weave and color. . . . Everything that Tom Hanks wore was woven for him.” The facing photo of Hanks in his long overcoat makes us grateful for Wolsky’s care.

I doubt that many viewers go to films in order to judge the costumes, but as long as we’re there, we might as well appreciate the good ones. We might also remember that costumes are usually extensions of the director’s concept of the film. In 1964 I spent a day with Federico Fellini in Rome while he was shooting *Juliet of the Spirits*. At the end of the day I thanked him, and he said, “Why don’t you go to see the genius who makes my pictures possible?” I asked who that person might be. Fellini said, “Piero Gherardi.” Gherardi was the designer, a longtime colleague of Fellini’s. He was out of town at the moment, and by the time I got back to Rome he had died. But I never see a Fellini film, which happens fairly often, without thinking of what the director said about his designer.

John Huston: Courage and Art (Crown Archetype, 475 pp.)

1 December 2011

It is notable that when people talk about the big directors of the Hollywood Golden Age, they frequently ignore John Huston. Yet he was the writer-director of such exceptional films as *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and *The African Queen*, and he made more that are memorable. Also, he won two Academy Awards.

Yet, eminent as Huston was, he was always a bit different from the rest of the leaders. It is this difference that is, to a considerable extent, explored in a new biography by Jeffrey Meyers, *John Huston: Courage and Art*. Meyers is a singularly seasoned biographer: he has published twenty-two, ranging in subjects from Robert Lowell to Gary Cooper. He has researched this one extensively and presented the results readably.

Meyers splits his time between literature and show biz, and he brings his literary self with him to this book. This helps him in his treatment of Huston’s difference. The first chapter, surprisingly enough, is a comparison of Huston and Ernest Hemingway (whose biography Meyers has also written)—to compare not their achievements but their characters. The two men knew each other, though they were not close friends, and they shared some personal traits—among them a love of boxing and bullfighting and a fascination with physical risk, along with other aspects that help to mark Huston (like Hemingway) as out of the ordinary. This peculiar opening chapter settles pretty well into place as the book proceeds because Meyers, though he does not scant Huston’s work, was taken by Huston the man.

The man was indeed striking. He was born in 1906, the son of Walter Huston, a veteran vaudevillian who became a superb common-man actor and who encouraged his son to follow his own fancy. This son of the common man then spent his early years in uncommon *Wanderjahre*—some Broadway experience, some art studies in Paris, some Mexican adventures, and more. He also launched a pyrotechnical love

life. Eventually he had five wives, but no one can count his lovers, not even the assiduous Meyers.

In time, after the father went to Hollywood, the son followed and got work as a screenwriter at several studios, then at Warner Brothers, where he was given some major projects. At last the studio had sufficient faith in him to let him write and direct *The Maltese Falcon*. His success there opened the way for him to the opportunities and frustrations that attend all prominent directors. (During World War II, be it noted, he served in the army's film unit and made three outstanding documentaries.)

Increasing acquaintance with Huston's polychromatic past and with his restless, questing character makes it clear that he was not the run of even the golden mill. From fairly early on, his persona—tall, commanding, vaguely aristocratic in manner, with an easy rich voice—seemed in an almost mystical way to accompany his pictures, and his occasional acting appearances oddly increased a sense of his presence even when he was not literally there. (Remember his performance, late in life, of the father in *Chinatown*, a figure of power and mystery, a man who, fantastically speaking, suggested the director of his films.) His persona was so vivid, Meyers tells us, that it served as a model for characters in nine novels and one play.

Meyers devotes a chapter to each of Huston's major films and is sometimes generous in his judgments. By no means were all of Huston's films good—some of them were, as even his biographer says, duds—but much of the time, even in his lesser films, we could sense that the director was bigger than his failure. *The Man Who Would Be King*, for instance, slides from Kipling's drama of human vanity into a noisy action epic, but the very ambition to do the film, plus Huston's sense of its size, gives it some quality.

Partly because of his very lapses and contradictions, especially the larger works that didn't quite come off, I couldn't help imagining throughout his career that this director was not just another film-world person—that he was part alien from some other place, that he had spied this planet and had decided to try a life here from birth to death. Whenever he appeared in public—at Oscar broadcasts, for instance—he conveyed the sense that he was a visitor being chummy among very interesting natives.

His last film was *The Dead* in 1987, his version of Joyce's masterwork. (His greatly gifted daughter Anjelica played the female lead.) Huston so loved doing it that, backed by his son and others, he insisted on directing, in a wheelchair, while suffering from acute emphysema, which killed him not long after. The film could not possibly equal the story but at least does not dishonor it, and Huston's own dramatic finish—dying in action, almost—seemed to fit the life that preceded it.

I once spent a day with him. Otto Preminger was making *The Cardinal* and was shooting some scenes in a Boston mansion that was supposed to be a cardinal's palace. Huston was playing the cardinal. I was invited to spend a day with the company, and in the morning I saw Huston play a couple of brief scenes with knife-edge clarity. We were introduced to each other just as lunch was being served at a long table for the company, and Huston, in cardinal's gown, chose to sit next to me. We had a relaxed chat. Two of the topics, I recall, were Dwight Macdonald and cigars, about both of which he was knowledgeable.

In the afternoon Preminger shot another scene, a tiff between Huston and the young priest who was the lead. After a run-through, Preminger shouted at the young leading actor, "Why don't you have some guts? Why can't you have some guts like this man?" (I omit Preminger's German accent.) The hapless young man never came near Huston's guts: he was an earthling. Huston was something else. Of course my

day with Huston doubtlessly enhanced my already impressed view of him, and Meyers' earnest book reinforces it.

Remembrances

Katharine Hepburn (1907-2003)

28 July-4 August 2003

The obituaries for Katharine Hepburn that I saw, in print and on television, were oddly gratifying. She was ninety-six when she died on June 29th, so there had been plenty of time to prepare those obits, and without being in the least eager, I had for a long time been curious about what they would say. In the event, they were in general pleasantly ecstatic. Hepburn had been in films for sixty-two years, longer than any other American female star. In tone and temper she was unique. At the start her individuality, her arched-neck air, had not always helped her. Early in her career *The New Yorker* ran a cartoon of two fillies in a pasture looking at another filly in the background. One of the two in front says to the other about the third, “Oh, there’s no talking to her since someone told her that she looks like Katharine Hepburn.”

But Hepburn triumphed over this sort of mockery, partly in a way that she herself might not have foreseen. Like Glenda Jackson and Emma Thompson, and unlike any other American actress, she made intelligence sexy. (Well, there were shades of it in Rosalind Russell and Irene Dunne.) Then, too, Hepburn’s beauty was, like her temperament, unique. When Hollywood improved the way it dressed and coiffed and lighted her, her beauty became a revelation—startling rather than seductive.

But, as one who saw (almost) all her films as they came out, beginning with *A Bill of Divorcement* in 1932, I noted that the obituaries scanted a peculiar quality of her success, her triumph over matters that would have sunk another actress. First, her accent and voice. Despite the help of coaches along the road, she never really modified her upper-class New England accent, even when she was playing an Ozark native (*Spitfire*) or a Chinese villager (*Dragon Seed*). As for the voice itself, she was well able to maneuver through the general reaches of drama or comedy, but sometimes the high moments of a role left her flapping. Even in the obituary film clips, there were occasional stretches of six or eight seconds when, to put it candidly, she sounded like a duck quacking. I chuckled. Such sounds might have capsized a lesser career, but Hepburn almost flaunted them.

The negatives of her success reached their apex in the most demanding role she ever attempted on screen. (Her Shakespeare and Shaw on stage don’t figure here.) She was diametrically miscast as Mary Tyrone in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. New England Yankees were exactly the species that O’Neill slashed in that play and in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, yet here his Irish-American Catholic protagonist was played by one of that hated species, a quintessential Yankee. In my view there were further reasons to criticize Hepburn’s performance, but few questioned her very presence in the role.

Hepburn not only survived this miscasting, she advanced through it, because she was especially armored. She was, as far as an American can be, an aristocrat. Girl-next-door stars are plentiful, as are stars who have glamorized themselves by various assets. Hepburn was a born royal, and no one more dearly loves a lord—or a lady—than democrats, if that royal person can nourish private fantasies. (Remember Princess Di.) Her implicit lofty status protected her.

Still another aspect distinguished Hepburn. All film stars, male and female, can be divided into two groups. In one of those groups, the star’s professional persona

and private persona are quite distinct. What did we know or care about the private lives of, say, Joan Crawford or Betty Grable or Robert Taylor? But in the other group, the professional and the private personae merge and strongly color each other. John Wayne is a chief example. Some people thought he really was a war hero: a medal was discussed. Marilyn Monroe, as a person rather than as an actress, evoked book-length caroling from Norman Mailer. Hepburn is certainly in this second group. As the years went by, audiences felt more and more strongly that she was herself the person that she played in films. In the course of time playwrights and scenarists began to promote her personal characteristics in the roles they wrote for her. The outstanding instance is obviously the role that Philip Barry created for her in *The Philadelphia Story*. (Oddity: the woman was named Tracy Lord, and this was several years before Hepburn was linked with Spencer Tracy.) This blending is also apparent in many of her later films. So thorough is the mixture that in those television obituaries, where clips from her roles and from her interviews were interwoven, sometimes I mistook one for the other. When two stars of group two are together, like Hepburn and Wayne in *Rooster Cogburn*, the picture takes on the feeling of a home movie made by them for their own amusement.

The prime example of Hepburn's victory over the usual prescripts was her long affair with Spencer Tracy. In 1940 she began living with Tracy, a married man, and they were together (more or less) until his death in 1967. The relationship was too well known to be called an open secret, yet—as far as I can recall—puritanical outrage was virtually mute. During that very same period, when reports came along in 1950 about Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini (both married to others), this country steamed with fury. Some groups strove to boycott Bergman's pictures; sly jokes about the affair were current; tabloids yelped. But I can remember no such fuming about Hepburn and Tracy. It was as if the public thought Hepburn—and, to be sure, Tracy—incapable of indecencies. In fact, four years after Tracy's death Garson Kanin published a book called *Tracy and Hepburn* that was a bestseller. Many of the obituaries referred to the affair reverentially. Canted though it is, that reverence was, in America, a low bow.

I saw Hepburn on stage only once, in a musical about Coco Chanel. Many, many times in my life I have regretted after a performance that the theater is ephemeral, but this was not one of those times. Fortunately, most of her adorers know her only through her pictures. Her obituaries demonstrated a special blessing of film: it allowed Hepburn to soar over her shortcomings by the power of her self.

Marlon Brando (1924-2004)

2 August 2004

The news of Marlon Brando's death on July 1st brought two kinds of sadness: regret that his life had closed, and regret that, artistically speaking, it had closed long ago. His last performance of any interest was in *The Freshman* (1990), and that was only a mirror image of the Vito Corleone he had created in 1972. Little that Brando had done in his last thirty years was commensurate with his genius.

The sting of his death brought a memory flash—of a stage performance. In 1946 he played the young poet Marchbanks in one of Katharine Cornell's revivals of Shaw's *Candida*. Brando didn't have the speech or carriage of the earl's nephew that Marchbanks is, but I have never seen a performance that convinced me more completely that a man is the artist he is said to be. Early in the play someone says to

him, "It should make you tremble to think that . . . the great gift of a poet may be laid upon you." Marchbanks replies: "It does not make me tremble. It is the want of it in others that makes me tremble." I can hear Brando still.

I had already been following him closely. In 1943, at holiday time, a children's play of mine was produced by Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop at the New School in New York. Brando was a student there and had been given the wordless role in my play of a guard at a king's court. At one point, meant to be comic, he was hit on the head and fell. Brando, without the help of the director (Mrs. Piscator), devised a collapse that was original and funny. The production was later moved uptown to the Adelphi Theater for a series of Easter matinees, so Brando made his professional debut in this bit part, getting hit on the head.

I asked about him at the school and was told that he was one of the more gifted students but that he was already "difficult." Apparently he had in him what Poe called "the imp of the perverse." Precisely because Brando was so gifted and had so apparent a potential, he was offhand about acting, bothering to be serious about it only when he actually was performing.

His first notable Broadway role, for which I had been looking out, was a short-pants youngster in something called *I Remember Mama*, and then he electrified audiences with his one taut scene in Maxwell Anderson's *Truckline Café*. This much-admired performance led to Marchbanks and eventually to Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which I saw twice. What I remember first about it is Stanley's cuticle. The setting had two rooms; at one point early in the play Blanche DuBois was in one room upbraiding her sister Stella about the brute she had married. Brando, unseen by the women, was standing in the other room, listening to Blanche's outburst, calmly biting the cuticle on one finger. This gesture told us everything we needed to know about Stanley's reaction to the outburst—and about the probable course of the play.

Soon Hollywood beckoned, of course, and Brando acquiesced when he was offered an interesting role—a wheelchair-bound war veteran in *The Men*, in 1950. His talent was recognized, but the film had small impact. Next he did Stanley Kowalski on screen, and the world was shaken.

To itemize his film career—a total of forty-one pictures—and to judge whether each was worth Brando's presence is not to me the most important matter just now. Rather, a contradiction presses. What became patent early on in Hollywood, what Brando obviously wanted to be known because he often talked about it in interviews, was his attitude toward acting. The imp of the perverse had apparently enlarged in him and now included a total scoff at any view of acting as an art, even as a respectable occupation for a serious person. It is common in the screen careers of stars, especially if they came from the theater, that they are at first very picky about the roles they accept, then gradually slip into the currents and standards of a film career with less and less choosiness. But it was more than that with Brando: his very spotty career, ranging from some peaks in the history of world film to some sheer embarrassments, seems less the result of Hollywood pressures than a sort of sloth, almost to nourish his loathing for the whole business.

One of the elements that apparently increased his loathing was the money. In his earliest days he could tease about acting as piffle when he was living at a relatively sane level. But when the money started to pour in, he was, it seems, twice affected: he wanted as much money as he could get at the same time that he thought the huge sums certified the silliness of the work. (By 1977 he was paid \$3.7 million, plus percentages of the gross, for twelve days' work on two *Superman* movies.) His

eventual monstrous obesity seemed a clear sign of his hatred for Hollywood. “You’re paying for this waistline,” he seemed to be jeering at the film world.

He could behave as he did because he was so golden at the box office and so fertile a publicity subject. (His personal life, not to be detailed here, helped too.) Still, the question persists: why? Why did he behave as he did? Leonard Bernstein, golden enough and glamorous enough in the music world, never animadverted against concertizing. Martha Graham, certainly not golden but certainly an icon, never spewed on dancing. Why did Brando spout as he did? Yes, the imp of the perverse had been there from the start, but was there something else, a secret?

David Thomson, in an astute obituary article about Brando, wrote: “It is striking . . . that his death comes at a moment when America’s maturity is tragically necessary yet tormentingly distant.” Thus Thomson implies that the vagaries of Brando’s career were related to the general social and political climate of his lifetime, an insight supported by his recurrent involvement in social and political movements seemingly as a version of penance.

I would add one other possibility. His perversity in his earliest days, spurred by Poe’s imp, may just have been a form of vanity, a nonchalance because he had to worry much less about the future than his contemporaries did. But as success and fame arrived, he may have become more and more acutely aware that his profession had low cultural standing in America. (Quite unlike Leonard Bernstein’s and Martha Graham’s.) His veneration of John Gielgud, when they played together in 1953 in *Julius Caesar*, supports this view. Gielgud came from a society where a great actor was a national eminence, not a mere celebrity. It is inconceivable that Brando could ever have said about Gielgud any of the things (according to Peter Manso’s biography) he said about himself. “I am not an artist. I hate when people say I’m an artist.” Or: “Acting is a bum’s life, in that it leads to perfect self-indulgence. You get paid for doing nothing, and it all adds up to nothing.” During Brando’s lifetime, America produced fine actors—Fredric March, for prime instance—and the fact that they were not regarded as they would have been in some other countries possibly confirmed Brando’s view. In fact Gielgud says in his autobiography that he offered Brando a chance to work in another world. “I begged him to play Hamlet, and said that I would like to direct him if he did.” Also: “I thought he would have made a wonderful Oedipus.” Brando said that he had no interest in returning to the stage. Perhaps by this time he was in love with his attitudes toward acting and didn’t want to risk becoming as serious as Gielgud about it. His very last work was a voice-over for a character in an animated film that has not yet been released.

Well, now Brando begins a new life as a figure in history, still a paradox. He may be even more of one to those who view his work in the future: less because of his comments about acting, which may fade, than because of the difference between the heights and the sloughs of his career. The best of actors have their ups and downs, but not many of them have his genius. Partly as possible truth about Brando, partly as solace about him for myself, I remember the Marchbanks line: “It is the want of it in others that makes me tremble.”

Michelangelo Antonioni (1912-2007) and Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007)

10 September 2007

They might have smiled. Averse as they were to plot mechanics in their work, they might have been amused at the blatant coincidence of their deaths on the same

day. Or they might have been amused at those who believe it was planned by a cosmic trickster. In any case, July 30, 2007 is now a signal date in film history. Michelangelo Antonioni was ninety-four, Ingmar Bergman was eighty-nine.

Their work now moves into a different light. Almost all the art that is valuable to us is encased in history: it comes to us from the past, recent or remote. These two men, however, were contemporaries of ours: I even knew one of them a bit. Still, in a doubtlessly romantic view, any prosy connections between them and the present were jarring. In 1976, Bergman had severe publicized troubles with the Swedish government about taxes. In 1984, newspapers carried a photo of Antonioni standing guard with other directors at the coffin of an esteemed political figure. It was a faint shock to see the creators of the art that is part of my secrets involved in these daily doings.

But now their art moves into history. In Godard's *Breathless* the matter is well put. A novelist is asked his ambition. He says: "To become immortal and then to die." Exactly so here, twice.

The proximate deaths of Antonioni and Bergman prompt something that was rare during their lives: comparison with each other. One way to do this job is to compare their views of the theater and the relation of those views to their films.

No obituary of Bergman that I have seen has mentioned his film of *The Magic Flute*. Such a film would quite obviously have been impossible for Antonioni. Not only is *The Magic Flute* the best film ever made of an opera—modest distinction though that is—but it marries beautifully the main currents of Bergman's life. His theater career was even more prolific than his film work. (There are several books solely about his theater productions.) Bergman, in the Mozart piece, seemed to want to dramatize his twofold being. The opera is handled with innumerable theatrical and cinematic delicacies, and we are also taken backstage from time to time into the lives of the people who are making the marvel. Bergman seems to be fusing his several masteries before our eyes.

Here the use of those masteries is explicit, but it is present in all his work. The second time I saw *Fanny and Alexander* I was especially wonderstruck by the way he handled his actors' movement—not camera movement, at which he was a wizard, but the choreographing of actors as if they were on stage. His excellence with actors has a history. For many years he worked with a group of actors at various theaters during the season, then used some of them in films made during the summer. He and they knew one another in coded but clear ways. In the very first sequence of *Scenes From a Marriage*, see how Erland Josephson and Liv Ullmann move together into the screenplay like experienced dance partners into a *pas de deux*.

Antonioni, after some theater work during his university days, had small interest in the field. He did some theater directing, including the Italian premiere of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, but when I asked him once if he was interested in more theater work, he shook his head. "No," he said. "Always the same shot."

This complete immersion in cinema led him to achievements that were possible only in cinema. Think of Jeanne Moreau's long walk through the streets of Milan in *La Notte*, in which virtually nothing extraordinary happens but which, sheerly through selection and silence and concentration, becomes a kind of melancholy poem about inner loneliness in the modern world. Think of the long last sequence of *L'Eclisse*, which is only a series of street scenes in Rome with none of the actors, scenes that might have been places of rendezvous for the two lovers we have come to know but are now peopled only by passers-by. Subtly, we face the eventual passing of the lovers' affair, along with the shaky nature of truths about

which we are hotly convinced at many moments in our lives. Neither of these two sequences, or plentiful others in Antonioni's work, would have been likely in Bergman.

Another means of comparison is in their differing views of time, views that are related to the theater. Excepting the Bergman films that were originally made for television and later condensed for the large screen, works thus born in different concepts of time, most of his pictures are tight, less than ninety minutes. Never is there any sense of imposed pace: only the theater's ethic that every moment must be utilized in character or dramatic development.

Antonioni, with no such imperative, wanted to employ time, real elapsed time, as a character, as a power that film gave him. The scene in *L'Avventura* in which two lovers kiss near the railway, really kiss for the first time, could conventionally have been condensed to half its length. Antonioni wanted us to breathe through the experience, to take something like the number of breaths that the lovers are taking in that scene (as they are in fact altering their lives), to feel its impact almost physically.

What fundamentally links Antonioni and Bergman, despite their differences, is a common theme: the question of God. Do we live in a godless universe? If this is so, how do we go about living? How do we make our choices? A generalization about these two artists is possible. For Bergman, the son of a clergyman who in a sense harassed him all his life, the question pressed constantly. For Antonioni, the question was answered early on, thoroughly, finally. Most of his films are about the result of this vacancy—the murkiness of compass points.

Bergman confronts the basic question intensely in a trilogy. Here are the titles, with his comments: "*Through a Glass Darkly*—certainty achieved. *The Communicants*—certainty unmasked. *The Silence*—God's silence—the negative impression." The centerpiece, known in America as *Winter Light*, is a drama about a clergyman whose faith is shaken but who is, so to speak, trapped in his religious office and continues in it doggedly, yet almost gratefully. Bergman once said of the film, "Everything became stations [of the cross] on the road for the priest."

Antonioni never deals extensively with religion in his films. (Elsewhere, in interviews and articles, he was explicit.) But his view of it underlies very much of his work, his sense that religion is a function of the past, now outworn. Look, for instance, at the stock-exchange scene in *L'Eclisse*. The building was originally an imperial basilica that had been converted into a Catholic church and then converted again into the Borsa. William Arrowsmith says: "Everything . . . about the stock exchange in Antonioni's film tells us that the director is conscious of its religious nature." Its religious devolution, one might say.

Thus the past clings, or tries to cling, to us. But what of the present, asks Antonioni, even the future? Look at the last scene of *L'Avventura*. Sandro is a middle-aged man, successful, self-despising, who persuades a young woman, Claudia, to become his lover. She hesitates because his previous lover was a friend of hers who disappeared, possibly a suicide, only three days earlier. At last Claudia, not untroubled, consents. A day or so later she and Sandro stop in a luxe hotel. She is sleepy; he goes downstairs. In the early morning she goes to look for him and discovers him with a tart. Sobbing, she runs outside to a terrace, stands there against the railing. (In one shot a ruined church is in the background.) Surely she is not only shaken by his action but is very possibly linking it with her own action in becoming his lover so soon after her friend was gone. Sandro comes out behind her slowly and sits on a bench, his back toward her. She turns, approaches him. She sees that he is

weeping, surely facing the void in himself. After a moment she puts a hand gently on the back of his head, and the film ends.

Her gesture is for me a terrifying moment. Claudia is not forgiving him: she doesn't have or want that power. She is acknowledging that Sandro, like her, is something of a victim—stranded in a hollow universe, left with only inutile shards of order. They are, in a profound sense, alone.

In 1979 Roland Barthes sent an open letter to Antonioni apropos of a retrospective of the director's work in Bologna. In my view the letter can be read as also addressed to Bergman. Barthes called Antonioni "not only in the realm of cinema—one of the artists of our time." He cited "the specters of modern subjectivity" that plague artists these days: "ideological lassitude, bad social conscience, the attraction to and distaste left by facile art, the trepidation of responsibility, and the incessant scruple that tears the artist apart, between solitude and gregariousness." He closed:

It is therefore necessary that you take full advantage of this peaceful, harmonious moment in which an entire assemblage comes to recognize, admire, and love your work. Because tomorrow the hard work begins again.

As it did, addressed by both Antonioni and Bergman, not only with their gifts but with their generally unremarked courage. What legacies they leave. Countless beneficiaries are yet to come.

Personal notes. I had an appointment to meet Bergman in Stockholm in the summer of 1964, but when I arrived, a colleague of his presented me with the director's apologies and the excuse that he had gone to his island to write a screenplay. I saw some other interesting film people in Stockholm; still I was, of course, disappointed. Two years later the film appeared for which—at least I told myself—Bergman had abandoned me. It was *Persona*, a sublime masterwork, so I forgave him.

I met and dined with Antonioni several times, in Rome and Venice and New York. From a cluster of Antonioni vignettes, here are two.

In 1966 I interviewed him for an hour and a half on PBS. Two years earlier in Rome he had promised to appear on television with me when he was next in New York—I was busy on the PBS station in those days—and when he arrived for the American premiere of *Blow-Up*, he kept his word. At the time he understood English but wasn't confident about speaking it; so a translator was there for his replies to my questions. After the taping he and I went back to the dressing room where we had been made up before the show. He picked up a towel, wiped his face, and was dismayed by the big red-brown smear. "Good heavens," he said. I laughed at the perfectly enunciated phrase in English coming from someone who had just needed ninety minutes of translation. He laughed, too, a little.

I saw him last in New York in 1992. He had come for the opening of a retrospective of his work despite the fact that in 1985 he had suffered a stroke that paralyzed his whole right side and left him speechless. (Yet he had continued, with assistants, to work.) When I arrived at the theater, I saw him in the lobby, with two or three people but not really listening to them. They went, and I walked up to him. His face warmed. He put out his left hand, and I grasped it in both of my hands. He made some sounds in his throat. After a moment, which was both long and short, I left.

Paul Newman (1925-2008)

5 November 2008

Three kinds of performers appear in films: actors, stars, and star actors. Some very good actors lack the looks and personality to become stars. Some stars, iconic though they may be, have just enough talent to get by. Then there are the actors who have both talent and charisma. No American was ever more indisputably a star actor than Paul Newman.

Newman's death on September 26th, like the deaths of all those who have mattered to us, brought memories—keeps bringing them. The first time I saw him was on Broadway in 1953. The play, William Inge's *Picnic*, was about a freewheeling vagabond who hits a small town and interferes between a girl and her well-behaved suitor. I found the suitor, played by Newman, much more interesting than the supposed hero. The last time I saw him on stage was in Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* in 1959, when, already a screen figure, he scintillated as an older woman's lover. (The film version preserved his performance.)

Newman's move to films transformed him from a valuable actor into a different order of being. In his first moments on screen, which were in a biblical disaster called *The Silver Chalice* from 1954, he seemed almost incredible—a paradigm created magically to exemplify the very idea of the star actor. It was hard to believe that anyone actually had been born so attractive and with so much talent. But soon he became familiar, even necessary. As film followed film, he became a kind of companion. In his earlier days Newman was dogged by comparisons with Marlon Brando, who was rising at about the same time, but their two careers and personalities separated so widely that the linkage soon came to seem silly.

To list all of Newman's noteworthy films, out of his sixty-five or so, would be pleasant but indulgent. Much has recently been said, justly, about his appeal, through a humanity that made even the selfish *Hud* someone we understood while we clucked. Instead, I join those who emphasize his range. Remember the pug in *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, the blithe bandit in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the white man raised by Apaches in *Hombre*, the aging fatalistic crime boss in *Road to Perdition*. But the one role that seems to sum up all he could achieve, and without vanity of achievement, is the alcoholic lawyer in *The Verdict*. Anyone looking for the quintessence of American film acting can find no finer instance than Newman in that picture. I have seen it five or six times, and now, in grateful obeisance, I want to see it again.

Claude Chabrol (1930-2010)

28 October 2010

The film world changed in September. One element has left. For the last fifty years, no matter what else was happening in that world, we knew that Claude Chabrol was making a film. He died on September 12th, in Paris, at age eighty; and that flow of (practically) a film a year has halted. His work, varying of course in interest, rarely varied in the quality of its making. Besides the obvious fact that his films will be missed, we will also miss the constant knowledge that one is coming. (Well, one more is coming: *Inspector Bellamy* with Gérard Depardieu.)

Chabrol's career was singular. He began as a critic in the *Cahiers du cinéma* group, and with one of that group, Eric Rohmer, he wrote a book on Hitchcock. He made shorts. In 1952 he married (the first of three wives) and with some money that his wife inherited he made his first feature, *Le Beau Serge*. The prestige of this work and his very active support in every way helped to promote several others in the New Wave.

After a few more films in that *Cahiers* atmosphere, works of some sort of social or textural adventure, his consequent work, without losing any of its formal distinction, became more popular. It would be teasingly inaccurate to call him a sell-out: he was seduced by the pleasure of making films into making as many as he could. Many commentators (myself included) have quoted John Russell Taylor's remark that it is difficult to evoke Chabrol's films on paper "because so much of the overall effect turns on Chabrol's sheer hedonistic relish for the medium."

Far from the tone of his earlier pictures, most of Chabrol's subsequent films involved mystery and murder without being anything like thrillers of the conventional type or even like his adored Hitchcock. His stories almost always had a core of character pertinence. Character was usually his chief concern—entanglements, oppositions, collusions, and drastic results, all seen with a kind of Gallic sophistication and all slightly tinged with comic despair. The action was never less than immediate and whole, yet often we got the sense that he was sitting next to us, saying, "Now look at this."

His chief latter-day attempt at something different, *Madame Bovary*, was not one of his best. For myself, insofar as I can sort through in my mind the dozens of Chabrol films that I have seen, two immediately stand out: *This Man Must Die*, in which a man seeks the runaway driver who killed his child, and *Landru*, in which Chabrol treated with magical irony the Bluebeard story that Chaplin had used in *Monsieur Verdoux*. The two pictures could and should be shown together. It is almost enough to say of Chabrol's life that his film is a fit companion for Chaplin.

Sidney Lumet (1924-2011)

9 June 2011

The departure of Sidney Lumet on April 9th brought forth, gratifyingly, a flood of appreciative comment. But there were two points about him that, as far as I could see, were underemphasized.

First, many of the obituaries said that Lumet, throughout his career, was concerned with social causes. This is true, but so was Stanley Kramer. The key quality in his career was, social causes or not, his growth as an artist. True, along the way he accepted some screenplays that were clinkers. Still, compare his work in his earlier films—say, *Twelve Angry Men* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*—with *The Verdict* or (sheerly in directing terms) *Guilty as Sin*. The earlier ones are by a gifted young man who wants us to notice that he can think of clever things to do, whether or not they fit the moment. Then take a look at the scene in *The Verdict* in which James Mason as a villainously clever lawyer walks around a long sofa addressing an unseen listener and finally reaches the point where we see that the listener is Charlotte Rampling, a secret accomplice. The movement of Mason and the camera, leading the story through suspense to revelation, is pure Renoir.

Then there is Lumet's book, *Making Movies*, published in 1996. I have just re-read it, and I certainly would group it with those masterly books on the subject by

filmmakers—notably Eisenstein and Pudovkin. This is not to class Lumet with giants, but it is to value the sense of participation with which he takes you through every step of preparing, making, and presenting a film. Some of the technical material is presumably dated by now, but the feeling that Lumet creates of the position of the director—the sense of responsibility, challenge, ultimate loneliness, and perverse joy in that loneliness—that, I would guess, will never be dated.

Tonino Guerra (1920-2012)

24 May 2012

The twentieth century keeps ending. The Italian screenwriter Tonino Guerra died in March at the age of ninety-two. For the film world, he was a major figure. He wrote for and with Antonioni, Fellini, Tarkovsky, and Angelopoulos. With *Amarcord* he and Fellini were nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. He was also enormously prolific in pop film. Not enough? He was a leading poet of his generation.

He collaborated with Antonioni on six films, including the great trilogy *L'Avventura*, *La Notte*, and *L'Eclisse*. The director once told me that when he had an idea for a film, he went away with Guerra for a couple of weeks and talked about it with him. In the introduction to a volume of his screenplays, Antonioni said, “With Tonino we have long and violent arguments; he’s helpful to me that way. But with him I can keep quiet as long as I wish without feeling embarrassed. And for this he’s even more helpful to me.” (Almost a scene in *L'Eclisse*.) In any case, something more than a *grazie* at Guerra’s passing.

Chronology: Stanley Jules Kauffmann

Born 24 April 1916 in New York City, the son of Joseph H. Kauffmann, a dentist, and Jeanette (Steiner) Kauffmann; one sibling, a sister, who pre-deceased him

Died 9 October 2013 in New York City

Educated in the public schools of New York City (including DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx) and at New York University (B.F.A. in drama, 1935)

Married 5 February 1943, to Laura (Cohen) Kauffmann (died in 2012); no children

Positions

Actor-Stage Manager, Washington Square Players, New York, 1931-1941
 Writer, producer, and director of a weekly radio serial for the Mutual Broadcasting Company, 1945-1946
 Associate Editor, Bantam Books, 1949-1952
 Editor-in-Chief, Ballantine Books, 1952-1956
 Consulting Editor, Ballantine Books, 1957-1958
 Editor, Alfred A. Knopf, 1959-1960
 Film Critic, *The New Republic*, 1958-1965, 1967-2013
 Freelance Book Reviewer & Cultural Commentator, 1961-2013
 Drama Critic, WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1965
 Host, "The Art of Film," WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1967
 Drama Critic, *The New York Times*, 1966
 Associate Literary Editor, *The New Republic*, 1966-1967
 Theater Critic, *The New Republic*, 1969-1979
 Professor of Drama, Yale University, 1967-1973, 1977-1986
 Distinguished Professor of English, York College, City University of New York, 1973-1976
 Visiting Professor of Drama, City University of New York Graduate Center, 1976-1992
 Theater Critic, *Saturday Review*, 1979-1985
 Distinguished Visiting Professor of Theater and Film, Adelphi University, 1992-1996
 Visiting Professor of Drama, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1993-2006

Awards and Distinctions

Emmy for "The Art of Film," WNET-TV, New York, 1963-1964
 Honorary Fellow, Morse College, Yale University, 1964-2013
 Ford Foundation Fellow for Study Abroad, 1964 and 1971
 Member, National Society of Film Critics, 1966-1971

Juror, National Book Awards, 1969, 1975
George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, 1972-1973
Member, Theater Advisory Panel, National Endowment for the Arts, 1972-1976
Member, Theater Advisory Panel, New York State Council on the Arts, 1977
Rockefeller Fellow, 1978
Guggenheim Fellow, 1979-1980
George Polk Award for Film Criticism, 1982
Edwin Booth Award for Significant Impact on Theater and Performance in New York, 1986
Travel Grant from the Japan Foundation for Interest in and of Support of Japanese Films, 1986
Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement, 1986
Fellow, New York Institute for the Humanities, 1995
Outstanding Teacher Award, Association for Theatre in Higher Education, 1995
Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism, 1999
“Film Culture: Past and Present,” Symposium in Honor of Stanley Kauffmann, sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at the City University of New York Graduate Center, 2002
Featured in the documentary film *For the Love of Movies: The Story of American Film Criticism*, 2009

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Before My Eyes: Film Criticism and Comment (1980)
Albums of Early Life (memoirs, 1980)
Theater Criticisms (1983)
Field of View: Film Criticism and Comment (1986)
Distinguishing Features: Film Criticism and Comment (1994)
Regarding Film: Film Criticism and Comment (2001)
Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann (2003)
Albums of a Life (memoirs, 2007)
About the Theater (2010)
Ten Great Films (2012)
Film Critic Talks: Interviews with Stanley Kauffmann, 1972-2012 (2013)

Fiction

The King of Proxy Street (1941; *The Bad Samaritan*, U.K.)
This Time Forever (1945)
The Hidden Hero (1949)
The Tightrope (1952; *The Philanderer*, U.K.)
A Change of Climate (1954; a.k.a. *A New Desire*)
Showdown Creek (1955, under the pseudonym Lucas Todd; filmed in 1957 as *Fury at Showdown*, starring John Derek)
Man of the World (1956; *The Very Man*, U.K.)
If It Be Love (1960)

Drama

The Red-Handkerchief Man (three acts, 1933)
The Mayor's Hose (one act, 1934); *The Prince Who Shouldn't Have Shaved: A Frolic* (one act, 1934)
How She Managed Her Marriage (one act, 1935); *The Singer in Search of a King* (one act, 1935); *The True Adventure* (three acts, 1935)
Altogether Reformed (three acts, 1936); *Father Spills the Beans* (three acts, 1936); *A Million Stars* (one act, 1936)
Cyrano of the Long Nose (one act, 1937); *The Marooning of Marilla* (one act, 1937); *A Word from the Wise, for Three Women* (1937); *Come Again: A South Seas Vignette* (one act, 1937); *Coming of Age* (one act, 1937); *Eleanor on the Hill: A Fantasia* (one act, 1937); *His First Wife* (one act, 1937)
The Cow Was in the Parlor (one act, 1938); *Mr. Flemington Sits Down* (one act, 1938); *Right under Her Nose* (one act, 1938)
The More the Merrier (one act, 1939); *Consider Lily* (1939)

Overhead (one act, 1940); *Play Ball!* (1940); *Close Courting* (one act, 1940); *The Salvation of Mr. Song* (one act, 1940); *The Victors* (1940)
Bobino, His Adventures (two act children's play, 1941)
The Bayfield Picture (one act, 1942); *Pig of My Dreams* (one act, 1942)
Cupid's Bow (one act, 1943)
Food for Freedom (one-act children's play, 1944)